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**TRISH JOSCELYNE**

**CHILDREN'S EXPLANATIONS OF AGGRESSIVE INCIDENTS AT  
SCHOOL WITHIN AN ATTRIBUTIONAL FRAMEWORK**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of  
the Open University for the degree of Doctor of Clinical  
Psychology

**SEPTEMBER 1999**

**SALOMONS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Background and aims**

This study explores the types of attributions children make about school bullying situations and how these attributions may be related to subsequent behaviour and feelings.

The relevant research background is explored - both from a bullying perspective and an attribution perspective. Psychological models that are thought relevant are discussed - particularly the learned helplessness model and Beck's cognitive-behavioural model.

The aims of the study were: to explore the kinds of attributions made about bullying by a non-clinical population; to explore the different types of attributions made by children within a framework of later attribution theories; to explore the relationship between type of attribution and type of solution offered; and to explore the themes linking different types of attributions in children's stories.

### **Design, measures and participants**

The study employed a mainly qualitative design but with some quantitative analysis using content analysis. Themes were explored using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

Seventeen 9 and 10 year olds were interviewed at school using a semi-structured questionnaire which asked questions about stories which children told about imagined aggressive situations.

### **Results**

The results of the content analysis suggested that children made a range of attributions which could be coded into characterological and behavioural attributions. There was some suggestion from correlational data that these were related to the type of solution offered by the participants.

Qualitative analysis explored some of the connections between the types of attributions and concluded by describing a typical framework for a 'story' about the bullying incidents.

### **Implications**

Several implications are explored for both bullying and attribution research. Suggestions are given for school interventions - particularly the importance of working with the powerlessness of victims. For clinical interventions, some ideas are explored for working with children who have been bullied or bully - although future research would benefit from looking at attributions within a clinical population.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Over the past few years there has been an increase in public interest in aggression in schools. A subtype of aggression has become known as bullying which is a term used to describe a certain form of behaviour found in a wide range of social settings. This term, when applied particularly in a school setting, is used by children (Smith and Levan, 1995); by teachers (Madsen1996) and researchers (Smith & Sharp, 1995).

This literature review begins by exploring the phenomenon of bullying. Firstly it attempts to define what bullying is within the general context of human aggression and discusses some of the difficulties that exist in defining the term. Following this section some of the research on the incidence and nature of school bullying is presented.

Psychological theories have tended to cluster around the questions of why some children bully and why others are bullied in an attempt to find ways of helping children and families at an individual level. This type of research is notoriously difficult to carry out and some criticisms of past research in this area are given. This section also covers some of the psychological effects of being bullied and being a bully.

The largest body of literature on interventions have been at a school level and so school interventions are briefly reviewed.

The second part of the literature review explores attribution theory and argues that researching children's attributions about bullying could add to



information on individual differences on the likelihood of being bullied, being a bully and also children's responses to bullying situations. Two psychological theories relevant to the effect of attribution are presented.

The section on attributions ends by looking at some current theories on attributions, particularly the possible difference between attributions for cause and explanations around solutions. Some developmental aspects of attributions relevant to this study are also covered.

### **1.1. What is bullying?**

There are many models of why humans act in aggressive ways towards each other from the purely biological to the more sociological. Models which have been developed to describe children's aggression have, on the whole, seen children as possessing inherent aggressive behaviours that become channelled into acceptable responses through socialisation (Sylva & Lunt, 1982). However, Bandura and Walters (1963) through a series of research studies, emphasised the importance of children *learning* aggressive behaviour through others by copying witnessed behaviour. Social learning theory has become an important influence in directing research towards the family and the influences that they may have in influencing children's aggression.

Further models of aggression (Patterson, Littman & Bricker, 1967) have criticised Bandura and Walter's (1963) model as being too simplistic and suggest that it is not only modelling that is important, but also the response from others to the aggressive behaviour. These authors suggest that

positive reinforcers can have an important influence on subsequent repetition of aggressive acts.

What distinguishes bullying from other aggressive acts (both at school and in other settings such as adult's workplaces) has usually been identified as the misuse of power (Smith, Morita, Junger-Tas, Olweus, Catalano & Slee, 1999). In bullying, a person or group misuse the power they have (either through size or status or strength) in an aggressive way. However, bullying also tends to have a repeated element with the receiver of the aggression being labelled as 'victim' after repeated acts of bullying.

How we define bullying is of interest because different definitions of bullying have led to different forms of inquiry and intervention (Lane, 1992).

Farrington (1993) identified six features of bullying commonly used by researchers:

1. physical, verbal or psychological attack or intimidation.
2. intention to cause fear, harm or distress to the victim.
3. affects the victim, by causing fear, distress or harm to the victim
4. an imbalance of power is involved
5. the episode is unprovoked by the victim
6. the episode is repeated with the same children over a long period

However, not all researchers, (or children) would agree that all these elements need to be present for something to be named bullying. For example, MacLeod and Morris (1996) in analysing calls to ChildLine, show that children do not always emphasise the repeated nature of the aggressive act.

There are some developmental differences in what is called bullying by children, which to some extent reflect the differences in aggressive behaviour found across the age span. Bjorkqvist, Osterman, and Kaukiainen (1992, in Bjorkqvist & Osterman, 1999), for example, have identified three developmental stages of aggression: direct physical, direct verbal (e.g. name calling) and indirect aggression (e.g. excluding from games). Younger children are less likely to show the 'higher' order types of aggression, but all three types of aggression can be found in older children.

Smith and Levan (1995) also suggest that younger and older children differ in their definitions of bullying. In their study 6-7 year olds, in response to questionnaires, included 'fighting with someone' and 'someone shouting at you because they are cross' as examples of bullying. Smith and Levan argue that this over inclusive definition might go some way to explain age differences in reporting of bullying which is higher in the younger age groups.

Bullying, therefore, is hard to define - especially if one is to take the full range of children's experiences into account. Much of the research on bullying, including the Whitney & Smith (1993) study, has used questionnaires which began with a definition of bullying using the criteria above. Although the data have been useful in collecting demographic details of bullying in a wide range of schools, it presumes that children filling in the questionnaire will take the written definition of bullying as a working model. It does not find out what children themselves think bullying is, or whether they experience types of bullying not cited in the questionnaire. With some notable exceptions, such as the ChildLine study, very little work appears to have been done which explores children's own ideas and experiences of aggression at school.

## **1.2. The nature and extent of bullying in British schools**

There has been a recent explosion in research into bullying in the UK. Smith & Sharp (1994) suggest this interest started with the reporting in the UK of the two decades of work in Scandinavia (Olweus, 1978; 1991). With the Norwegian work filtering through to Britain, several initiatives were started which led to peaks of media interest throughout the late 80's and 90's. These are described in detail by Smith & Sharp, but include mention of bullying in the Elton report (DES, 1989, in Smith & Sharp, 1994); the funding of the Sheffield anti-bullying project (Whitney & Smith, 1993); the funding of the ChildLine special bullying line (La Fontaine, 1991); and a *That's Life* programme about the topic which followed from the suicide of an adolescent girl in part caused by school bullying.

In general, research on bullying can be divided into three main areas: work which looks at the incidence and nature of bullying in schools through questionnaires to teachers and pupils; direct studies of children who bully and those who are bullied (their personalities, background, attitudes and family influences); and results of intervention studies aimed to decrease bullying in schools. Only a brief overview of the findings of these types of studies will be covered here, but fuller reviews can be found in Smith & Sharp (1994) and Tattum & Herbert (1997).

### **1.2.1. *The Incidence of school bullying***

The largest study in the UK to date, that reported by Whitney & Smith (1993), questioned teachers and 6,758 pupils through anonymous questionnaires and found that in Junior and Middle Schools a total of 27% of pupils said

they were bullied sometimes or more and 10% said they were bullied once a week or more. In secondary schools the figures were 10% for sometimes or more and 4% for once a week or more. Four per cent of pupils in middle schools reported to have bullied others once a week or more. Similar findings have been reported by Boulton & Underwood (1992) and Miller (1995, in Smith et al., 1999)

### **1.2.2. *The nature of school bullying***

In an early study into bullying, Arora & Thompson (1987) used a 'Life in School' checklist to explore the nature of bullying in secondary schools. Actions which pupils most perceived as bullying included hitting and kicking, demanding money and breaking belongings. Whitney & Smith (1993) in their survey found that 50% of pupils in junior/middle schools said that bullying took the form of general name calling with 36% saying they had been physically hurt.

As our schools become more multi-cultural, bullying can also have a racist element. Of the 1500 ChildLine calls, discussed above, only 30 were from identified minority ethnic groups but of these, 93% cited a racist related bullying problem (MacLeod & Morris, 1996).

Children with special needs in mainstream schools are also reported to be at high risk for bullying: A study by Whitney, Smith & Thompson (1994), statistically matched children with special needs to mainstream children of the same age, gender and race who did not have special needs. The results of the study showed that the children with special needs were two to three times more likely to be bullied at school.

Research by Rivers (1995) suggests that pupils of different sexual orientation may also be at increased risk from bullying: over half of 140 young gay men and lesbians said they had been either physically assaulted or ridiculed by pupils and teachers.

For most pupils in the Whitney & Smith (1993) survey, bullying was reported to have been carried out mainly by one boy, and this was true for both boys and girls although the rate was higher for boys. Whitney & Smith (1993) also found that in general girls tended to be bullied only slightly less than boys - although more boys than girls admitted to bullying.

There is also an increasing interest in the literature on the interaction between gender differences and bullying behaviour. MacLeod and Morris (1996), for example, found verbal aggression higher than physical aggression in girls; and Björkqvist, Lagerspetz & Kaukainen (1992) found indirect forms of aggression higher in girls than boys. However, a more recent study suggested that physical aggression in girls can be a significant part of girl/girl bullying (Jones, unpublished).

In terms of year differences, across both junior and secondary schools the proportion of pupils being bullied tended to decrease quite sharply as they grew older. However, it is interesting to note that the number of children who admitted to being bullies tended to remain relatively constant at an average of 4% over year groups.

### **1.2.3. Children who bully and are bullied**

In general the purpose of the research on bullies and those who are bullied (hereafter referred to as 'victims') is to inform the work on interventions. For example, if it was found that victims of bullying had low self-esteem then this might suggest that intervention work could be aimed at raising these pupils' self-esteem and thereby protecting these children from bullying. Such research, although well motivated, has many associated problems:

Firstly, a difficulty with these studies is that they rely on correlational data and therefore the direction of causality can only be inferred. For example, Salmon, James & Smith (1998) in a study looking at the links between mental health and bullying found that victims were more likely to have higher anxiety scores. This result can either be interpreted to suggest that the experience of being bullied results in higher anxiety or that anxious pupils are more likely to be the victims of bullying behaviour.

Secondly, research on school differences in rates of bullying behaviour (e.g. Mellor, 1990) suggest that bullying needs to be studied at a macro as well as a micro level. For example, pupil characteristics alone do not account for the large differences between reported bullying in schools (between 2.5% and 15% in this Scottish study).

Thirdly, there are likely to be interactions between many variables and trying to tease out which is the 'significant' variable will become a chicken and egg exercise. For example, Rigby (1994) in a study using the Family Functioning in Adolescent Questionnaire found a gender effect on whether the adolescents in families with 'inadequate' communication at home reported being bullies or victims. In his study, he found that boys in these

families could be either victims or bullies whereas girls were more likely to be victims but not bullies. One variable (family communication) alone cannot account for the gender difference.

Lastly, it is likely that there is not a 'typical' bully or victim. For example, Pikas (1989) has suggested that victims may be at least divided into two sub-groups: those whose behaviour does not overtly encourage bullying and those whom to some extent act provocatively towards those who bully them. In dealing with averages (such as in the Salmon et al., (1998), study, individual differences are lost and the process either involves no significant results (because of the large variance) or results that skate over differences. Also these studies often do not acknowledge that a child can be both victim and bully and that this might change over time.

Given these criticisms, most studies on characteristics of bullies and victims are flawed, but nevertheless point towards some potentially useful lines of further research.

Firstly, there is increasing evidence that families of bullies and victims may differ from other children. For example Farrington (1993) as part of a longitudinal study of London children has reported some intergenerational patterns with fathers who were bullies at school more likely to have sons who bullied.

Randall (1997) in a review of the literature suggests that some types of parenting styles may result in increased likelihood of aggression in children. He suggests that parents characterised by low warmth and high control are more likely than high warmth/ high control parents to have children who later become aggressive at school.



Smith & Myron-Wilson (1998) have used attachment theory to attempt to explain why certain types of family functioning might result in bullying by the child. In reviewing the literature, they suggest that children with insecure-anxious attachments to their parents are more likely to have difficult peer relationships when they go to school. However, this research has not yet distinguished why insecure attachment will result in becoming bullies for some children, victims for others and yet untroubled school functioning for a third group of children. Clearly attachment difficulties can only form a vulnerability factor within a wider picture.

Secondly, research on bully/victim characteristics suggest that there may be differences between bullies and victims. For example, Boulton (1995) found that victims were rejected by their peer group and bullies were liked by some and not others, and that this social standing was stable from year to year. In terms of character, Olweus (1980) suggests that bullying children may naturally have more aggressive and impulsive temperaments whereas victims may lack assertiveness skills.

#### **1.2.4. *Psychological effects of bullying***

There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that the experience of being bullied at school can have detrimental effects. Boulton & Smith (1994), for example, found that victims of bullying were more likely to have lower self-esteem than non-victims. Olweus, (1993, in Smith and Sharp, 1994) found evidence of lower self-esteem and depressive tendencies in 23 year olds who had been bullied at school. Although it is difficult to separate cause and effect in these studies, Sharp and Thompson (1992), in interviewing secondary aged pupils, found that 20% of pupils said they would truant to

avoid being bullied and 22% said the experience of being bullied resulted in symptoms of physical illness. At the extreme end there are several cases of suicide each year in the UK where bullying has at least contributed to the suicide (Smith & Sharp, 1994).

Bullies, too may suffer as a result of their behaviour although their psychological needs are less likely to be met by professional services. For example, longitudinal research by Olweus (1991, in Smith & Sharp, 1994) found that persistent bullies are more likely to be involved in anti-social behaviour and physical violence in their early twenties. Although this later behaviour is unlikely to be a result of the early behaviour, but a symptom of some underlying difficulties, it is possible that early interventions with bullies may either help them find different ways of behaving, or tackle some of their underlying difficulties.

### **1.3. School Interventions**

Despite the research looking at family functioning and individual characteristics, most of the interventions against bullying have taken place at a school level (Smith & Sharp, 1994). Perhaps more than any other potentially psychologically damaging problem, an implicit systemic model has been the main driving force behind interventions. Smith & Sharp (1994), for example, conclude that several factors can support school bullying. First of all certain types of behaviour are part of 'normal' interactions between pupils. The peer group support these interactions either actively or by lacking the will or leadership to encourage different types of behaviour. Staff within the school may have implicit beliefs which passively support the bullying situation (for example, that children need to learn to defend themselves in the 'real world') or they may not know the

extent of the problems. Staff, too, are not immune from a bullying culture and may model forms of behaviour such as targeting certain pupils for punishment (Bjorkqvist & Osterman, 1999).

Several intervention projects have been launched and evaluated in recent years which aim to reduce the amount of bullying in schools. A major project funded by the DFE took place through Sheffield University (Smith and Sharp, 1994). This project helped develop schools' policies around bullying, helped raise pupil and staff awareness of the issues, worked through the curriculum to help pupils use a problem-solving approach, and trained lunch time supervisors, as well as working with individual pupils using methods such as assertiveness training. In terms of overall results, most schools that took part in the project showed at least some reduction in total amount of bullying and frequency of bullying (as assessed by anonymous questionnaires) as well as showing an increase in bullying disclosure.

Mellor (1999) in summarising the evidence of intervention projects in schools in Scotland provides some optimism for school approaches, but suggests that there is no one solution that is right for every school. As he suggests, anti-bullying action needs to take into account different themes in school, and the interaction between these, ethos, values, child protection issues, special needs and parental partnerships. Turning a school round along all these dimensions as well as the interactions between them, is a process that may take years rather than months.

### **1.3.1. Disclosure**

One of the issues important for schools is the amount that pupils disclose about bullying - either the victim's disclosure or disclosure from other pupils. The Whitney and Smith (1993) study found that of 144 pupils who reported being bullied once a week only 48% had told a teacher and 65% had told someone at home. In terms of who intervened, an average of 54% thought that teachers sometimes or almost always intervened and 50% of this age band thought that other pupils might intervene.

Disclosure is naturally seen as an important part of any reactive work done on bullying and therefore interventions have aimed at raising disclosure rates in schools (for example in the Smith and Sharp, 1994 study).

However, the results of these questionnaire studies leave unanswered the question whether pupils do not tell anyone because of the perceived unhelpfulness of doing so, or for other reasons (such as fear of increased bullying).

The results of the ChildLine study (MacLeod & Morris, 1996) suggest that pupils' pessimism in not disclosing about bullying is not unwarranted. Fifty-seven per cent of children who had told their parents had experienced no change or a negative outcome as a result of telling. Schools fared better with 28% of children who had told their teachers reporting no change or a worsening of the situation. Although the ChildLine survey would have produced a skewed sample (i.e. those still with problems) it does give some evidence towards explaining why pupils may not always tell. MacLeod and Morris categorised these types of unhelpful solutions and found these were: ignoring or denying the problem, taking action for the child without involving

the bullied child and suggesting that the child resolve it themselves, (for example by ignoring the bullies).

## **1.4. Attribution theory**

### **1.4.1. *What are attributions?***

The term attribution refers to inferences made about the causes of events. It is a way of answering the question 'why' that arises frequently in everyday life. For example, a person who suddenly becomes ill will search for possible causes (Michela & Wood, 1986). Attribution theory emerged in the 1960's and has increased in sophistication since then - paralleling and contributing to the recent interests in the role of cognitions on behaviour and emotion.

Research on attributions can largely be divided into two fields: those studies that explore how particular attributions become formed (Kelley, 1967); for example why a person may decide that the death of a relative was their fault. Secondly research has explored the consequences of certain attributions on for example behaviour and emotions. (Michela & Wood, 1986). This second type of research is more prevalent in the field of mental health as the hypothesis is that certain types of attributions may be related to mental health problems and subsequent behaviour. For example, a person who attributes their depression to an imbalance of chemicals in their brain may look for a medical intervention to their problem.

#### **1.4.2. Why study attributions about bullying?**

There are several reasons why looking at attributions may be important in studying school bullying.

Firstly, it may be that certain types of attributions are related to the likelihood or not of one becoming a bully or a victim. For example, Hazler, Carney, Green, Powell, and Scott-Jolly (1997) in a survey of 'expert' identification of bully and victim characteristics found that experts thought victims had many internal attributions, but the study did not test out these assumptions by looking at victims' real attributions.

Secondly, attribution literature suggests that attributions have an effect on subsequent behaviour. For victims, this behaviour may include what they decide is the best solution to their difficulties. For example, one might expect that a pupil who thinks it is their own fault that they are being bullied may believe it is also their own responsibility for changing the situation and therefore not involve anyone else.

Thirdly, it may be that attributions relate to subsequent mental health following bullying. Two main theories suggest that certain types of attributions may be related to depression:

##### **Learned Helplessness model**

Alloy, Abramson, Metalsky & Hartlage (1988) in the latest formulation of the learned helplessness model (Seligman, 1975) suggest that certain types of attributions made about non-contingent aversive events will have a detrimental effect on mental health. In particular, they suggest that stable

and global attributions made about aversive events will lead to a hopelessness position which is linked to later depression. For example an individual may attribute a car accident to the fact that they have always been a bad driver (stable, global) and therefore be in fear of further accidents and avoid driving, whereas if they were to attribute the accident to momentary inattention while fiddling with the radio, (unstable, specific) they would be unlikely to be in constant fear of further accidents. Both internal and external attributions if they are stable and global would be problematic. For example, an external, stable, global attribution would be "the roads are not safe anymore, I better avoid driving." Where the attributions are internal they are also linked to self-blame ('it's all my fault there was an accident')

### Beck's model of depression

Self-blame is also an issue for Beck's theory of depression which suggests that depression is associated with too much self-blame (Beck, 1967).

According to this theory depression is linked to the individual blaming themselves for negative outcomes, particularly personal failures and that this results in lower self-esteem, self-deprecation and feelings of guilt. This negative view of the self is part of the negative triad of negative feelings about the self, world and future and is also linked to helplessness.

Although these models would seem to suggest different paths to depression, and different emphasis on the role of the self, later formulations of attribution theory suggest that if other factors are taken into account, then depression may be related to the *nature* of self-blame rather than self-blame per se. The three factors most relevant here and those that will be discussed below are the role of perceived control, the importance of different types of self-blame

and the difference between blame for the problem and responsibility for the solution.

#### **1.4.3. *Perceived control***

Perceived control of one's fate is part of a large literature on reactions to victimisation and the way that this relates to how we structure the world (Janoff-Bulman & Frieze, 1983). In general, individuals act on the assumption that the world is meaningful and that what happens to them makes sense. According to Lerner (1980, in Janoff-Bulman & Frieze 1983) individuals appear to operate according to an implicit belief in a just world where they can prevent misfortune by engaging in sufficiently cautious behaviours. Misfortunes which seem to operate against this belief therefore can be extremely problematic. For example, Sheppele and Bart (1983) found that those women who had the most difficulty coping with rape were those who had been following their own personal safety rules when they were raped and were thus in a perceived 'safe' situation.

Thompson (1981) argues that perceived control can have an effect on subsequent psychological health due to several factors: it may make the situation more predictable (for example if an individual knows when an event will occur they can prepare for it psychologically); it may reflect on one's self-analysis (for example the need to feel a sense of personal competence); or it may give a message about outcomes (i.e. having control over a situation allows one to minimise future danger).

Alternative explanations of perceived control, however, have concluded that the need for control is not so much to do with what can be done or tolerated



by the individual, but with their need to make sense of the world and for it to be orderly and meaningful (Bulman & Wortman, 1977).

#### **1.4.4. Self-blame attributions**

Self-blame refers to an attribution about personal responsibility for a difficulty or problem. As suggested above, there is a debate about whether self-blame is adaptive or harmful. On the one hand blaming oneself may make an individual feel ashamed, inferior or guilty (Beck, 1967); on the other it may be that self-blame allows some degree of control over an outcome.

Janoff-Bulman (1979) has attempted to resolve this paradox by distinguishing between two types of self-blame which have different consequences on behaviour and mental health. These are behavioural versus characterological self-blame. Behavioural self-blame involves attributing one's victimisation to one's specific behaviour ("if I had not walked alone at night, I would not have got raped") whereas characterological self-blame involves attributions to one's character or personality ("I am a natural victim"). Janoff-Bulman argues that the differences between the two types of self-blame are mediated by the amount of control they allow the individual over future events.

Characterological versus behavioural self-blame has been studied for various types of negative events, for example looking at women's adjustment to rape (Janoff-Bulman, 1979); adjustment to breast cancer (Timko & Janoff-Bulman, 1985) and in adjustment for children with insulin-dependent diabetes (Tennen, Affleck, Allen, McGrade & Ratzan, 1984). In general the literature is consistent with the idea that characterological self-

blame is associated with negative outcomes such as depression (Janoff-Bulman, 1979) and behavioural self-blame with better adjustment (Timko & Janoff-Bulman, 1985).

One study to date has looked at behavioural versus characterological self-blame with children who have been bullied. Graham & Juvonen (1998) asked middle school children about hypothetical situations in which a child experienced a negative school event. They also looked at children's own perceptions of their own victimised status at school as well as the perceptions of class mates. In addition, the children filled in questionnaires about loneliness, social anxiety and low self-worth.

As Janoff-Bulman (1979) hypothesised, characterological self-blame was associated with lower scores on the 'adjustment scales' for those with high 'victim status'. However, Graham & Juvonen also found that behavioural self-blame was moderately correlated with low adjustment and was in fact highly correlated with characterological self-blame. Regression analyses on the data suggested that behavioural self-blame did not have a direct and independent effect on the adjustment indices suggesting that it may have been its relationship to characterological self-blame that was important. However, because this study used questionnaires, this relationship could not be explored further. This study also did not distinguish between fault for a problem and responsibility for the solution or the relationship between the two.

#### **1.4.5. Problems versus solutions**

A further theory that relates to how individuals cope with an adverse event relates to distinguishing between the types of attributions individuals make

about the cause of the problem and the attributions about the responsibility for a solution. In terms of the models of control above, what may be important is not how much individuals blame themselves for the past, but how much they are able to affect the future.

Brickman, Rabinowitz, Karuza, Coates, Cohn & Kidder (1982) put forward four models which suggest a split between the blame for a problem and responsibility for a solution. In their *compensatory model* individuals are not responsible for their problems but they are responsible for their solutions.

Attribution theory would suggest that solutions are related to the attributions that individuals make about the cause of their illness (i.e. the literature suggesting some behaviour stems from the types of attribution made about the cause of a problem, e.g. Weiner, 1979). Michela & Wood (1986) argue, however, that problem self-blaming and solution may be independent, in that different attributions may be made for the problem and the solution. Even when the attributions differ, however, there are likely to be links between the two. For example, Michela and Wood (1986) give an example of a woman who attributes her cancer to living near a toxic dump site (external attribution). Her solution is to move home (self-control). The two attributions differ, but there is a link between the two. One problem with the amount of attribution research which uses questionnaire data is that individuals' 'stories' are not sufficiently explored to identify such links.

#### **1.4.6. Developmental aspects to attributions**

The literature looking at the development of attributions is relevant because it may be that children differ from adults in the types of attributions made and that this difference might have particular consequences for mental health.

Although there has been a good deal of literature exploring at what age children are able to make certain types of attributions (reviewed by Miller & Aloise, 1989), the developmental aspects of attributions and mental health have in the main not been explored.

Miller and Aloise (1989) exploring attributions made by three and four year olds, challenged the view held in the literature that children prefer attributing to external causes than internal causes. In their review of the literature they found evidence that young children were able to not only show knowledge of internal states, but to understand that these have an influence on behaviour. Young children were also able to make attributions based on internal as well as external causes.

Authors using different methodologies have suggested that children do make distinctions between characterological (i.e. stable and internal) versus behavioural self-blame (i.e. unstable internal) but all of these have used questionnaires with forced choice questions (e.g. Graham & Juvenon, 1998).

In general, therefore, it seems that children in the age group studied do not differ substantially from adults in the range and type of attributions made and therefore comparisons with adult studies are not unwarranted.

### **1.5. Aims of the present study**

This study is designed to explore the attributions children make when explaining aggressive incidents at school. It avoided the use of the term bullying as previous research had shown children were inconsistent in their understanding of the term (Smith & Levan, 1995). However, it was

hypothesised that the results of this study would be relevant to the literature on bullying.

In particular, this study aimed to overcome some of the methodological problems associated with questionnaires which to date dominate the literature, by allowing children to tell their own stories about school aggression.

The study had four main aims: the first was to see if children were in fact able to make attributions about the kinds of situations they encountered in school.

Secondly, it aimed to explore the notions of characterological versus behavioural self-blame within the bullying situation and it asked whether this distinction was adequate in describing children's attributions about blame or whether there were other attributions that were made.

Thirdly, it aimed to explore the relationship between attributions about the fault for a problem with responsibility for a solution - particularly in terms of perceived control. It aimed to explore whether there were links between the types of attributions made and the types of solutions offered - particularly in terms of whether disclosure was related to causal attributions.

Fourthly, it aimed to explore whether children tried to make coherent stories about the bullying situation and whether those stories could explain some of previous research showing links between characterological self-blame and behavioural self-blame (Graham & Juvonen, 1998).

The study aimed to be of use in helping develop theories about why children may be affected in different ways following bullying and whether some ways

are more psychologically adaptive than others with links, therefore, to suggestions for guiding therapists and teachers working with bullied children.

The result of the study can also add to the growing literature on self-blame attributions and possibly help to answer some of the questions raised by previous studies - particularly about the links between attributions and subsequent behaviour for victims.

## **1.6. Selecting a methodology**

Two principles guided the choice of methodology: firstly the data collection needed to be as open as possible in order to allow children to use their own experiences to talk about school aggression. However, given the non-clinical setting for the study, it also needed to protect children who did not wish to talk about their own experiences, but not to exclude them from the study. To this end a semi-structured interview schedule was conducted which asked children open-ended questions about *hypothetical* experiences of aggressive incidents at school allowing the participants to generate the situations themselves. The use of hypothetical stories is one that has proved useful in past studies collecting data on children's thoughts about bullying (for example, Graham & Juvonen, 1998), however, these hypothetical stories have usually been prepared by the researchers and may therefore not have properly reflected children's own experiences.

Secondly, once the data were collected, a methodology was needed which allowed direct comparisons to be made between types of attributions and the types of solutions offered. Given the already large literature on attributions, content analysis seemed a good choice, using the literature to

guide the preparation of a coding frame. The use of content analysis also allows the use of some descriptive statistics.

However, a further aim of the study was also to look at the ways that children made links between behavioural and characterological blame and therefore a more qualitative methodology was needed to study how children constructed their stories. As not all the text was being analysed, but only the attributions relevant to this study, and as a new theory was not being built, Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was rejected as a possible methodology. Instead, Smith's (1995) Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis' was used to analyse the themes of the different attributions and the links between them.

## **1.7. Research questions**

For the more quantitative part of this study, research questions were more specific. When looking at emerging themes, questions were regarded as a preliminary guide to further exploration.

### **1.7.1. Quantitative questions**

**Q1** What kinds of aggression scenes do participants describe?

**Q2** Do children make different types of attributions when describing aggressive incidents - can the kinds of attributions they make be described by the concepts of characterological versus behavioural blame?

**Q3** Do children differ in the likelihood of making particular types of attributions - i.e. do children have particular response styles across story conditions?

**Q4:** Do children's stories differ in their concentration of attributions around the different protagonists?

**Q5:** Do children distinguish between the fault for the problem and the responsibility for the solution?

**Q6:** Is there a relationship between fault for the problem and solutions - particularly do participants who make more characterological attributions give a solution that involves little control/ change by the victim.

#### **1.7.2. *Qualitative questions***

**Q7** In what ways do children make links between the various attributions related to the bullying situation?

**Q8** Are there other themes relevant to an understanding of children's attributions about the bullying situation?



## **2. METHOD**

### **2.1. Design**

The study employed a mainly qualitative design but with some quantitative analysis in order to explore and clarify some of the specific questions raised in the literature review.

The data were collected through a semi-structured interview which asked questions of children as they invented their own scenes of aggressive incidents using small dolls to act out the characters in the scene.

The interviews were transcribed and content analysis was used to identify types of attribution. Further themes were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, 1995).

### **2.2. Participants**

A total of 17 participants from two schools took part in the research. Seven from School 1 and ten from School 2. Both schools were in inner-city London and thus there was high ethnic minority representation.

Due to the small scale of the study, theoretical rather than random sampling was used: only children in years 5 and 6 were targetted. This year group was chosen because previous literature has targetted children of this age and thus comparisons could be made (for example, Parkhurst & Asher, 1992). In addition, studies suggest that at this age bullying is sufficiently

common for children to have some knowledge of this type of behaviour (Whitney & Sharp, 1993). Children of this age were also likely to have sufficient comprehension and expressive skills to be able to understand and answer the questions asked in the interview.

The two schools taking part in the study were chosen because they had both volunteered to take part in a larger anti-bullying initiative in their Borough. The organisers of the study suggested these schools in particular as the head teachers had indicated they would be open to research being carried out in their schools as part of the study.

It is possible that because of the way the schools were chosen, they were not representative of schools in general as they had identified themselves as being interested in an anti-bullying project. However, for the purposes of this study, this was an advantage as it would suggest the children might have had some experience or knowledge of bullying and thus be able to answer the questions in a thoughtful way. The anti-bullying intervention had not started in the participating schools at the time of data collection.

The procedure used for selecting suitable pupils is described under 'procedure'. As a result of the initial letters the following pupils took part in the study.

In school A, nine parents initially responded with two parents refusing permission for their child to participate with no reason given.

In school B, eight parents responded initially, with one refusal with no reason given. In order to try to recruit more participants, a further letter was sent out to both schools and this resulted in three more parents giving

permission in school B, but none in school A. No parents at either school contacted the researcher directly, but some parents did talk further with the teacher before reaching a decision. All letters sent to the parents are shown in Appendix 1.

A total of seventeen parents, therefore, gave permission for their children to participate in the study and in consultation with their teachers, all seventeen children were chosen to be interviewed.

It is likely that due to the relatively low uptake in the study (32%), a bias might have existed in the participants chosen. Apart from the obvious gender bias within schools (in school 2 this reflected the unequal numbers of boys and girls in the class) the teachers could not identify any other obvious biases in the participants who responded and there was a good overall ethnic diversity. Ethnic minority was ascertained by asking the child's class teacher (information was gathered on the child on entering school.) Table 1 gives the details for the 17 participants.

**Table 1: Description of the participants**

	<b>School A</b>	<b>School B</b>
<b>Gender</b>	5 girls/2 boys	2 girls/8 boys
<b>Average age</b>	9.8	10.5
<b>Ethnic origin</b>		
African-Caribbean	1	0
African	3	4
Traveller (Polish origin)	0	2
White (English)	0	1
Bengali	0	1
Turkish	2	1
Mixed race	0	1
Middle Eastern	1	0

### **2.3. Measure used**

Each child interviewed was asked to construct two stories from their imagination and then asked further questions about their stories using a semi-structured interview.

The imaginative stories were used as a form of projective technique - theoretically children were expected to organise their stories around their real life experiences as well as their wishes and fantasies about situations.

Herbert (1992) suggests that children are able to express through fantasy and play some of the frustrations, fears and uncertainties they may not be able to express in direct conversation. He suggests that projective techniques work, by allowing the child to identify with central characters in the stories and therefore they 'project' their own feelings (especially difficult to acknowledge impulses or attitudes) into those characters. By doing so, they attribute various motives and ideas that are basically their own into the characters in the play and creative stories.

Oppenheim (1992) suggests the use of projective techniques in order to help participants overcome several barriers including what he calls 'the barrier of inadmissibility and the barrier of self-incrimination'. The use of such a technique overcame three main problems which would have arisen if children had been asked about their real experiences.

Firstly, ethically it would have been difficult to offer appropriate support to children in a non-clinical setting if the children were invited to explore potentially disturbing aggressive episodes.

Secondly, many of the children may not have had direct involvement of aggressive incidents at school (although this is unlikely given the large scope of the initial questions.)

Thirdly, children may have felt unable to talk about real life episodes (for example, it may have involved themselves or a friend acting in an aggressive way.)

Although there would have been many advantages of asking children about real-life experiences, the purpose of the research was to see *how* children

talked about bullying episodes not what kinds of episodes they described as such. Therefore the exact nature of the episodes recounted were not as important as the way these were talked about.

### **2.3.1. *The semi-structured Interview***

Although previous interviewers (e.g. Graham & Juvenon, 1998) have used imaginative stories to explore children's understanding of bullying, these were generated by the interviewer and this approach would not have fulfilled the purpose of the present study to start from children's own stories.

An interview schedule was therefore constructed for the purpose of this study using guidelines suggested by Smith (1995) and after a careful review of the literature on attributions in children.

In order to construct the questionnaire, the overall issues to be tackled in the interview were identified at first and questions were generated around these main themes.

Four, open-ended questions were constructed which covered the general themes. Each general question was followed by possible follow-up questions which could be used if the child did not spontaneously discuss any of the themes explored in this study. This process - called funnelling by Smith (1995) - allows the interviewer to cover the areas of the study while allowing respondents to first give their own views. Follow up questions were not all asked, but the interviewer chose the most appropriate to ensure that the interview remained with the story of the participant.

Specific questions were also asked about the scene - partly to allow children to become immersed and to elaborate their story and partly to enable the researcher to map out the kinds of scenes children described when asked about aggressive incidents. The interview schedule is given in appendix 7.

### Validity of the interview schedule

**Face validity** was sought by sharing the questions in the schedule with behavioural support teacher with a experience of bullying and some changes were incorporated after discussion. Advice was also sought from a researcher with an experience in constructing questionnaires and again changes were made.

In order to attempt to assure some **content validity** before the schedule was carried out, the interview was piloted on one participant known to the researcher of a similar age to the targetted participants. The answers were written down and examined with the behavioural support teacher to ascertain whether the answers given sampled the tested psychological domain (i.e. attributions). Although not all questions asked produced attributions from the respondent, some did and it was presumed that different respondents might produce attributions from different questions so questions were not dropped at this phase though some questions were rewritten because they had appeared ambiguous to the respondent.

It was noted that several questions produced similar answers from the respondent suggesting some further evidence of content validity, but this could not be tested using statistical analysis as the data were only categorical.

Further issues of validity and also reliability are discussed in the results section of this study.

## **2.4 Interview procedure**

During the interview the project and procedure was discussed first and consent obtained. Each pupil was then given instructions to choose from a variety of small dolls. These dolls were five inches high with moveable limbs but able to stand on their own. There were both boys and girls represented and Black and Asian and White dolls as well as dolls of different sizes. Pupils were asked to use their choice of dolls to act out a scene which did not have to be real in which one or more children got upset because of what one or more children do to him/her/them. Questions were then asked about the scene. When all themes had been explored, pupils were asked to think of a different kind of scene also where a child was getting upset. At the end of the interview, pupils were debriefed and returned to class. The full interview lasted on average about 30 minutes with no interview lasting more than 40 minutes. Interviews were timed so that children missed class activities, but no sport or breaks.

## **2.5 Coding procedure following data collection**

### ***2.5.1 Attribution Coding Frame***

In order to compare the data with results from previous research, and to explore the patterns of attributions, a coding frame was prepared using the procedure recommended by Oppenheim (1992). A new coding frame was



prepared because previous coding frames did not cover all the aspects which this study wished to explore. In particular the Peterson et al., (1993) 'content analysis of verbatim explanation' had a number of problems. For example, it does not cover the distinction between characterological and behavioural blame. Also it presents the coding as a numerical scale (presumably to allow parametric statistics), but does not give a theoretical reason for doing so.

In preparing a new coding frame, the following procedure was used: Firstly the literature provided some early categories and a sample of the data in the present study were classified using these categories. Where data could not be coded using these existing categories, notes were made about some emerging themes in the data and these were then grouped into new categories keeping the 'flavour' of existing categories. A further sample of the data were then analysed in order to test the usefulness of these new categories, and where there was still uncategorised data, the process was repeated until all attributions could be successfully coded.

Initially the categories for victims and bullies mirrored each other but some categories were dropped for victims when no data fell into these categories. Section 3.4 gives a full description of each category with examples of data falling in each.

### ***2.5.2 Solution Coding Frame***

The procedure for the solution coding frame was slightly different as previous literature had not coded solutions in a way useful for this study. In addition, the coding frame for the solutions needed to provide some numerical categorisation which ranked solutions on the amount of control

experienced by the victim in achieving a solution (e.g. telling a teacher) and also the amount of power that they had over the subsequent intervention (e.g. moving to a new school).

The data for the solutions were read and reread and specific themes as well as general patterns were noted. For example a specific theme might be who the victim told whereas a general theme might be the victim telling versus a teacher passing by and seeing the incident.

As a result of this analysis, two general themes emerged, the first was how other people found out about the bullying and the second was what happened as a result of the bullying. These two themes formed different layers to the coding scheme with different weighting being attached to each. For example more weighting was given to the victim telling someone than a teacher seeing, and more weighting was given to the bully changing than the victim leaving the school. One numerical category was assigned per solution with weighting from both themes. Therefore a story with a high change/ low control solution, could have the same score as a low change/ high control solution. The full solution coding frame is given in Appendix 9.

## **2.6. Interpretative phenomenological analysis**

This was the method used in the qualitative part of this study to look at themes that emerged and to see how they fitted together into a coherent whole.

Smith (1995) suggests the following procedure:

### *Reading the transcript*

- The transcript is read many times and notes are made of anything the researcher thinks is significant in one margin.
- The second margin is used to document emerging theme titles using key words to capture the essential quality of what is emerging.
- On a separate sheet the emerging themes are connected and super ordinate concepts are identified. Examples, or identifiers of incidents are noted.

The above procedure recommended by Smith (1995) was adopted for the attribution statements made by the participants which had already been marked in the text and also for the whole of the solution statements. In the final part of analysis one 'meta-theme' was developed in order to explain the underlying structure of the majority of the participants' accounts.

## **2.7. Ethical considerations**

A number of the procedures used in this study were to enable participants to make an informed choice about their participation in the study and to provide support for them should they become distressed during any part of the process. Other issues of ethical consideration were those of confidentiality and access to the research findings for the participants. The research proposal was assessed and approved of by the Salomons Ethics Panel (appendix.13).

### **2.7.1 Establishing consent**

The first stage in establishing consent was to obtain consent from the project organisers on the anti-bullying project. This was done by a presentation of

the study with the interview schedule and approximate needs in terms of number of participants and time taken. Head teachers of the individual schools were then approached in person and the study explained and written consent obtained.

A day was then spent in each of the identified classes which began by a short talk for all the children in the class and then during the day, time was allowed for any questions that the pupils may have had about the study. At the end of the day, letters were given out to all pupils in the class with two weeks for these to be returned. These letters explained the objectives and procedure of the research, offered access to the researcher and or class teacher for further information, explained how participants could withdraw at any point during the study, and discussed issues of confidentiality. A separate form was also enclosed asking for consent for the interview to be tape-recorded with issues about the confidentiality of this material (see appendix 3).

Letters were sent in English although the opportunity was given for translated letters to be sent. No child or parent asked for a translated letter.

If parental consent was granted then on the researcher's return to the schools, each of the pupils was given a handout about the study at the beginning of the day. Before being interviewed, each of the pupils was asked individually if they had any further questions about the study and was asked to sign a consent form (appendix 5) to say they would like to participate in the study. As no pupil said they would not like to take part at this point, it is likely that pupils who did not want to take part had not asked their parents to sign the consent form.

### **2.7.2 Identifying school support**

Each of the two schools identified a person within the school whom pupils could approach if they had any issues they wished to discuss after the study. In both cases this was the class teacher who was also the teacher with responsibility for liaison with the anti-bullying initiative.

### **2.7.3 Debriefing**

At the end of each interview, pupils were asked about their experience of being interviewed and whether they had anything they wished to say to the researcher. They were also told about the identified school support. Issues of confidentiality were also re-discussed. Most of the pupils described the interview as 'fun' and said they had enjoyed acting with the dolls. Five pupils, however, used this opportunity to discuss some of their concerns about some bullying behaviour in the class. After some discussion, and with the permission of the pupils involved, these concerns were written down and discussed later with the class teacher. All five pupils who took this opportunity were from School A. The class teacher involved had already been aware of some of the issues which were being dealt with through the school behaviour policy.

At the end of the project, all participants and their parents were sent short letters with the results of the project and a contact address for any further enquires. Schools were given the opportunity to take up an offer of a class workshop or a session for the teachers on the results of this study but neither schools took up this offer. A short report with the results of the study was sent to each school instead.

### **3. RESULTS**

#### **3.1. Introduction**

The interviews resulted in 17 participants each describing two stories so that at the end of the transcription process there was a total of 34 stories. In order to address the research questions both quantitative and qualitative analysis were used. In this results section the quantitative and qualitative results will be presented separately with the related research questions informing the presentation of the data.

In order to produce data suitable for some quantitative analysis and descriptive statistics, the transcripts were first analysed using content analysis using the two coding frames described in the previous section. In addition, the data were coded for various descriptive statistics such as the number of protagonists in the stories.

Non-parametric correlations were then used to test out specific hypotheses about links between attributions and solutions.

The qualitative part of the analysis used a procedure recommended by Smith (1995) in order to draw out categories and themes in the data.

Lastly the results section will explore the links between particular categories of attributions by looking in more detail at the content of stories which typify particular patterns of attributions.

### **3.2. Inter-rater reliability**

In order to test the reliability of the coding frames three people were asked to code a subset of the data (25 attribution statements and 10 solutions). The data were chosen at random with a stipulation that there was a sufficiently representative sample of each of the codes. The coders, who included one non-psychologist, were given a 10 minute training session with practice items and then used the coding frames to assign codes to the data. Cohen's Kappa coefficient was used to assess the inter-rater reliability as this takes into account the probability of coders categorising the data with the same codes by chance.  $K = 0.701$  for the attribution coding frame and 0.54 for the solutions frame. According to Robson (1993), this is good reliability for the attributions coding frame, and fair for the solutions frame. The coders' data were not used in the main analysis as in all cases at least one coder agreed with the researcher.

### **3.3. Types of stories**

**Q1** What kinds of aggression scenes do participants describe?

Table 2 gives the number of stories which fell into certain categories. The categories explored in this part of the analysis described the main protagonists of the stories as well as the type of behaviour described and the frequency of that behaviour. The data were gathered either from the participants' descriptions of the scenes or from their answers to specific questions about their scene.

**Table 2: Descriptors of the scenes and protagonists**

(total for each row = 34 )

	1	2	3 or more	
<b>Number of aggressors involved</b>				
number (percentage of total)	15 (44%)	4 (12%)	15 (44%)	
<b>Number of victims involved</b>	1	2	3 or more	
number (percentage of total)	26 (76%)	6 (18%)	2 (6%)	
<b>Age of aggressors</b>	under 5	7/8	9/10/11	12 or above
number (percentage of total)	1 (3%)	3 (9%)	25 (74%)	5 (15%)
<b>Age of victims</b>	under 5	7/8	9/10/11	12 or above
number (percentage of total)	3 (9%)	3 (9%)	28 (82%)	0
<b>Relationship in age between victim(s) and aggressor(s)</b>	Same age	Aggressor older	Aggressor younger	
number (percentage of total)	20 (59%)	12 (35%)	2 (6%)	
<b>Gender of aggressor(s)</b>	Girl	Boy	Mixed girls and boys	
number (percentage of total)	12 (35 %)	11 (32%)	11 (32%)	
<b>Gender of victim(s)</b>	Girl	Boy	Mixed girls and boys	
number (percentage of total)	23(68%)	8 (24%)	3 (9%)	
<b>Race of aggressor(s)</b>	Black	Asian	White	More than one
number (percentage of total)	3 (9%)	6 (18%)	10 (29%)	15 (44%)
<b>Race of victim(s)</b>	Black	Asian	White	More than one
number (percentage of total)	8 (24%)	6 (18%)	14 (41%)	6 (18%)
<b>Bully(s) behaviour</b>	Excluding from games/ spreading rumours	Name calling teasing/ threatening	pushing shoving hitting kicking	other <sup>1</sup> (destroying property)
number (percentage of total)	3 (9%)	16 (47%)	12 (35%)	3 (9%)
<b>Frequency of bullying</b>	once off	occasionally	more than once a week	
number (percentage of total)	6 (18%)	8 (24%)	20 (%59)	

<sup>1</sup> Examples of data fitting into these categories are given in appendix 10.



### **3.4. Attributions made during the telling of the story.**

**Q2 Do children make different types of attributions when describing aggressive incidents - can the kinds of attributions they make be described by the concepts of characterological versus behavioural blame?**

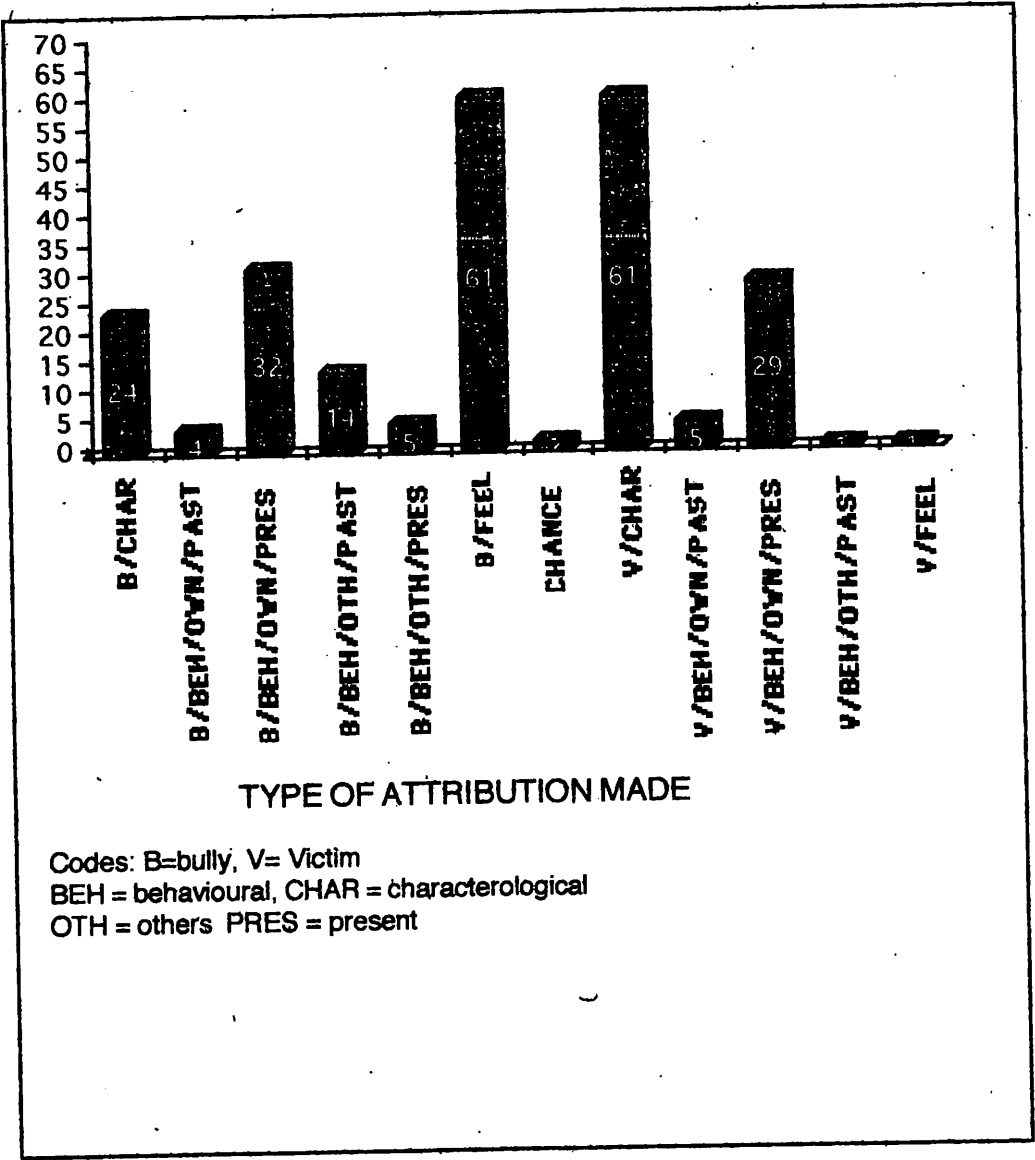
The content analysis of the participants' stories resulted in the following categories which are explained briefly with an example in Table 3.

**Table 3: Types of attributions with explanations and examples**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Explanation</b>	<b>Example</b>
Bully characteristic	Something unchangeable about the bully. An internal, stable explanation	<i>and he's [bully] not really smart</i>
Bully behaviour own past	The bully is responsible but because of something that they did in the past. All behaviour attributions are unstable attributions.	<i>Yeh because them lot [Bullies] wanted to keep beating them [victims] up and then they never got talking again.</i>
Bully behaviour own present	The bully is responsible for the behaviour in the present.	<i>[it was her fault because] she was taking the mickey out of Lucy.</i>
Bully behaviour others present	The bully is responsible but his/her behaviour is due to someone else's behaviour (other than the victim's).	<i>Ahmed [is responsible] Because their [bully and victim] sisters are going to fight and Ahmed's [bully] sister went over Cindy's [victim] sister and start fighting.</i>
Bully behaviour, others past	As above except the behaviour was of others in the past.	<i>Its her mum and dads fault cause, she didn't have any attention.</i>
Bully feelings	An internal state that could change - includes likes dislikes and emotions.	<i>Because she [bully] just likes doing it - its like boxing, she just likes doing it for fun -</i>
Chance	A chance event resulted in the incident.	<i>because her shoelace is untied she might have fallen</i>
Victim characteristics	As for bully	<i>you see this [victim] ones littler</i>
Victim behaviour own past	As for bully	<i>well they [bully and victims] were all just playing when they were little children and then these two girls [victims] didn't want to play anymore with them... and then this whole conflict started.</i>
Victim behaviour own present	As for bully	<i>but sometimes he [bully] hits them because they [victims] call him names</i>
Victim behaviour others past	As for bully	<i>because maybe the [victim's] brother beat them up before so they [bullies] beat him [victim] up.</i>
Victim feelings	As for bully	<i>this ones [victim] afraid of this older one [bully]</i>

Figure 1 gives a summary of the number of different attributions falling into each of the categories in the coding scheme for all of the 34 stories.

Figure 1: Total number of attributions which fell under different categories



As can be seen by Figure 1, the participants did make different types of attributions when describing their scenes. However, there was a tendency to make more attributions about the bullies (59%) than the victims (46%).

The number of total attributions made was evenly distributed between attributions that could be described as characterological (36%), behavioural (38%) and those attributions to do with temporary feelings, likes or dislikes (26%) or else those attributions about chance (0.01%).

Figure 1 also shows that there was a difference between the attributions made towards the bullies and the victims with most attributions for the victims being characterological (63% of attributions towards victims) whereas most attributions made towards the bullies were about emotions/likes or dislikes (44% of attributions towards bullies.)

As can be seen by Figure 1, approximately two thirds of the attributions made could be categorised into either behavioural attributions or characterological attributions.

However a substantial number of the attributions did not fit into either category. These were attributions in which an internal state was being described which was unstable rather than stable. The best description of these seemed to be feelings or likes and dislikes. For example the concept of jealousy arose in some of the stories where the victims were picked on because of feelings of jealousy within the bully. A new category, not previously described in the literature was therefore used for these attributions.

***Q3: Do children differ in their likelihood of predominately using certain categories of attributions?***

In order to test the hypothesis that participants had one style of responding, each participants' two stories were compared using correlations.

Participants' percentages of: characterological attributions was correlated with percentage of behavioural attributions using Pearson's product moment correlation (as these data could be scaled on an interval scale). In addition, to see if the participants responded similarly between stories in the percentage attributions about either the bully or the victim this data was also correlated. Participants' solution responses for the two stories were also correlated although a non-parametric test (Spearman's Rank Correlation) was used as the data could only be ranked.

There were no significant correlations between stories suggesting that participants did not have one style of responding irrespective of story content all  $r$ 's  $< 0.3$  (see appendix 11).

The lack of correlation between stories also meant that they could be treated as unrelated conditions therefore giving a data set of 34.

In order to further answer the question whether participants' stories fell under certain category response types, the data for the above categories are displayed in a histogram. If there were particular types of response, one would expect a bimodal distribution of the data with participants responding with either a high or low percentage under a given category. As can be seen by figures 2-5, the data show a surprisingly good fit to a normal distribution suggesting that the participants do not in general fall into particular response 'types'.

Figures 2-5: Histograms for percentages of attributions made under certain categories.

Figure 2  
Percentage of characterological attributions made

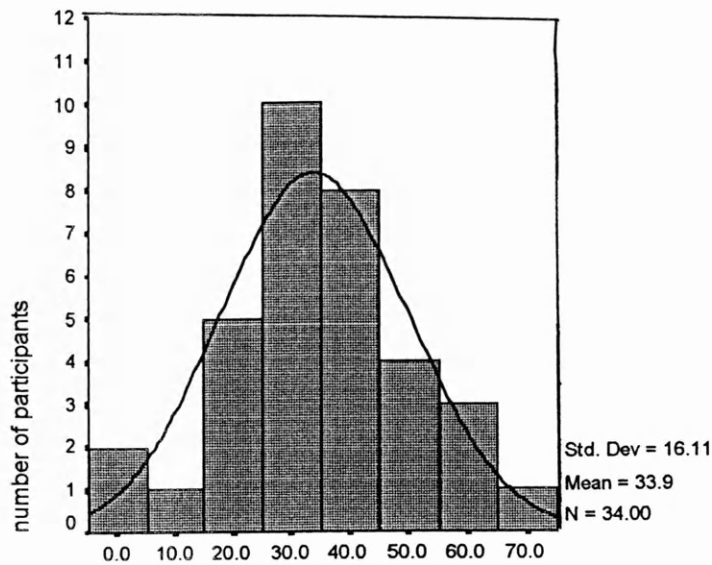


Figure 3  
Percentage of behavioural attributions made.

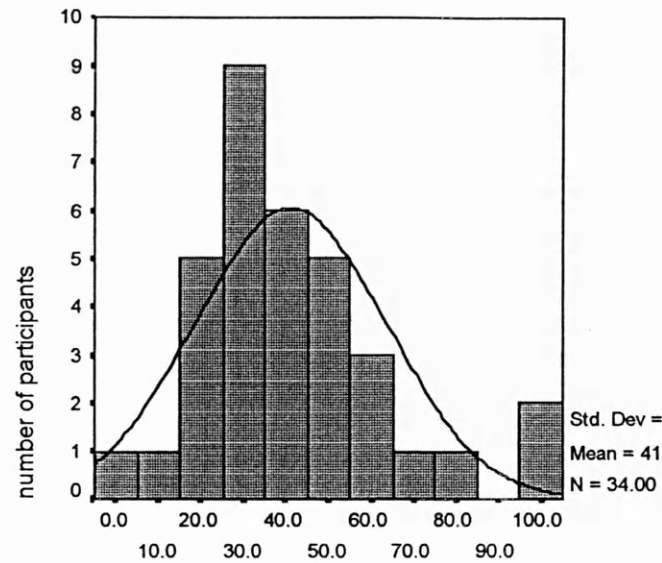


Figure 4  
Percentage of attributions made towards the bully

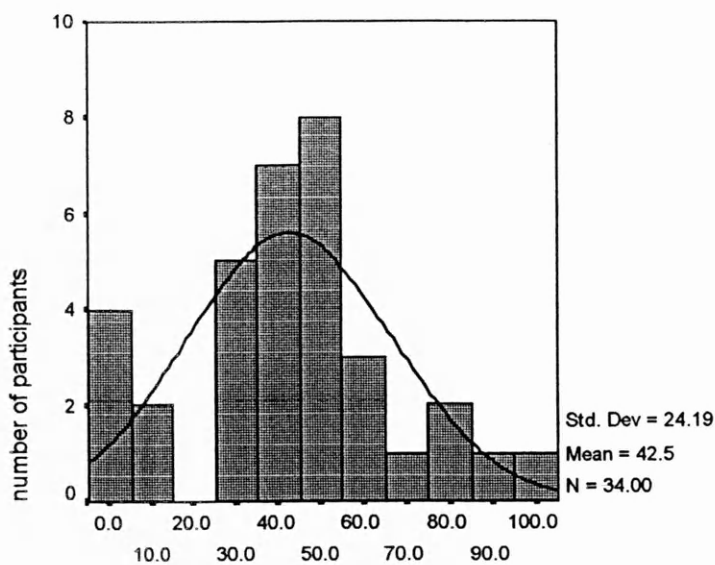
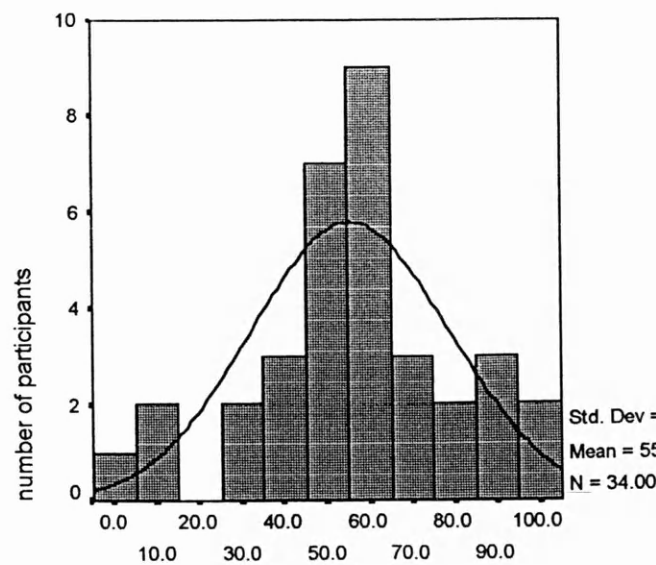


Figure 5  
Percentage of attributions made towards the victim



***Q4: Do children's stories differ in their concentration of attributions around the different protagonists?***

In order to test whether children's predominantly made attributions either about victims or about bullies all the total number of their attributions towards the victim was correlated with all of their total number of attributions towards the bully using Pearson's Product Moment Correlation. Numbers rather than percentages were used in this case because if percentages had been used an either or situation would have arisen - i.e. attributions not towards the victim would have had to have been towards the bully.

There was no significant correlation between attributions towards the victims and attributions towards the bully suggesting that the children did not have stories that predominately concentrated around one of the protagonists ( $r=0.03$ ).

***Q5: Do children distinguish between the fault for the problem and the responsibility for the solution?***

During the content analysis as well as categorising attributions for the fault of the problem, note was also made of any text which appeared to be about solutions to the problem. On the whole this was in answer to a direct question about solutions, although occasionally participants spontaneously gave a solution or resolution to the problem. There was a clear distinction between the fault for the problem and the resolution, for example in the way that different protagonists were involved in the problem and the intervention. Themes of solutions are described in more detail in the qualitative descriptions below.

All solutions were categorised using the second coding frame described in the methodology section. The aim of the second coding frame was to categorise the solution data using ordinal categories. Solutions were judged for two factors that of amount of control that the victim had over how the problem got discovered and secondly the amount of involvement they had over the intervention including the amount of change that arose out of the intervention.

The full coding structure is given in appendix 8.

***Q6: Is there a relationship between fault for the problem and solutions - particularly do participants who make more characterological attributions give a solution that involves little control/ change by the victim?***

In order to explore this question, correlations were carried out on the percentages of some of the types of attributions and degree of control/change of the solutions. If there was a relationship between the two measures one would expect negative correlations - i.e. high characterological attributions would be associated with low solution scores.

#### Correlational data

As the solutions data were rank data rather than interval Spearman's rank correlations were used for all these analyses. As there was a specific suggestion about the direction of the data, (higher percentage of

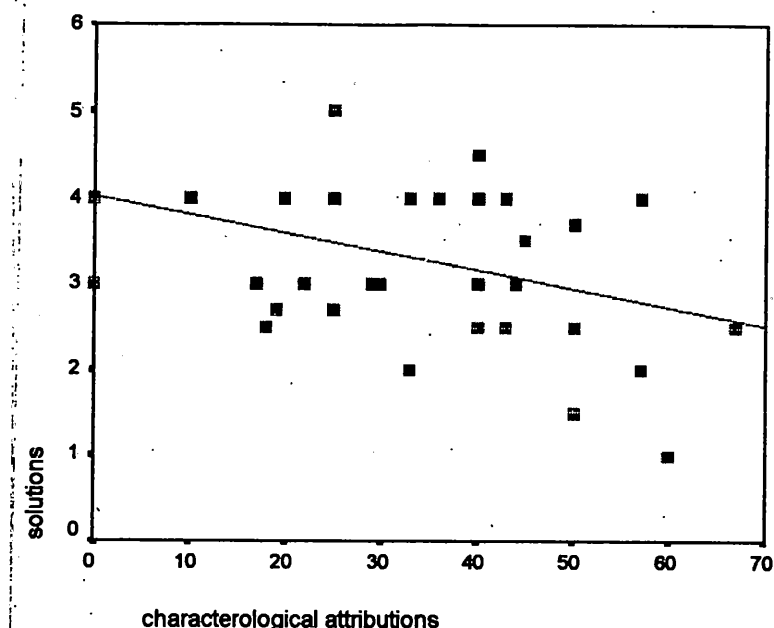


characterological attributions would be related to low solutions scores), a one-way test was used.

Firstly in order to test the relationship between the percentage of characterological attributions and solutions, the total percentage of characterological attributions made was correlated with the solution scores. In order to further test this relationship, correlations were also computed for the total percentage of behavioural attributions made. The results were significant in the predicted direction for the characterological attributions ( $\rho = -0.336$ ,  $n=34$ ,  $p < .05$ ), but not for the behavioural attributions ( $\rho = .085$ ,  $n=34$ , n.s.).

In order to explore whether there was a difference between characterological attributions to the bully or to the victim and relationship with solutions, the two sets of data were correlated independently with solutions. There was a significant correlation in the expected direction between percentage of characterological victim attributions and solutions ( $\rho = -.333$ ,  $n=34$ ,  $p < .05$ ), but not for the percentage of bully characterological attributions and solutions ( $\rho = -0.013$ ,  $n=34$ , n.s). The positive correlation is shown pictorially in the scatter diagrams in figure 6 : These results suggest that there is a relationship between the percentage of characterological attributions made to the victim and the solution offered, but that the solution is not related to the characterological attributions made to the bully. As predicted, a high percentage of characterological attributions is related to a low score on the solution.

**Figure 6: Scatter diagram for percentage of characterological attributions towards the victim and score on the solutions.**



### **3.5. Qualitative analysis of the data**

***Q7: In what ways do children make links between the various attributions related to the bullying situation?***

The analysis followed methodology suggested by Smith (1995). The attributions were treated as preliminary categories and then these were expanded to firstly draw out the kinds of themes that went with particular attributions.

Following this, connections were made between the different attributions and these became higher order themes which were used to explain why each participant made a range of attributions within their stories.

The major themes are given below with a brief description beneath. Each of the major themes is followed by the subthemes which make up that category. Some examples are given to illustrate how the themes emerged.

### **Connecting the past and the present**

Within this theme the participant attempts to give an explanation of why the bully came to be behaving in the way they are now. Sometimes the explanation is about why they became the type of person they are, and sometimes it explains the situation that is being described. For example where a victim's sibling hurt the bully in the past:

Although these types of explanation could fall under a category of external attribution, the responsibility for the behaviour on the whole remains with the bully - the explanations of the past events are not so much an excuse as an explanation. About forty per cent of the stories gave some kind of explanation set in the past as to why the present situation had occurred.

- **Conflict started between victim and bully in the past**

*well they were all just playing when they were little children and then these two girls didn't want to play anymore with them anymore.*

- **Bullies were bullied in the past or had relations who were bullied.**

has anything like this happened to Laura? [bully]

*yes, another girl when she came new to the school*

*why does that make him bully*

*because someone must have bullied one of his relatives when they were younger and they died.*

**• Bully was ignored/ rejected by family**

*Its like if you get rejected, then you think that they don't love you and you just take it out on other people.*

**• sibling of victim hurt bully in the past**

*yes, she [bully] got hurt, because she [victim] had a big brother so she got hurt by her big brother, so she [bully] went to hurt her[victim].*

**• bully was influenced by others in the past**

*Because there was a kid that used to be in their school and they were about 5 years old and the kid said come on, come on John and Mark, come let's be bullies, then they got used to bullying.*

**Connecting characterological attributions with behaviour**

Within this theme, the bully is seen as having some stable characteristics from which stem the behaviour that is described. Often the word bully was used as an attribute in its own right as an explanation of the behaviour.

The majority of statements of this nature made about the bully were of a negative nature, but some stories described the bully as being better or cleverer than the victim and therefore teasing the victim for their failure. Two

stories about football concentrated on the bully attacking the victim for missing a penalty goal.

• Just how some people are meant to be/ they're just a bully

Why is he responsible?

*because he shouldn't have hit her - it's just how some people are meant to be.*

• naughty/bad

*Yes because this one is naughty boy:*

What is it about these children that make them bully?

*because, they're bad and because they smoke a lot*

• Racist/elitist

why is this happening?

*because people are racist*

• stronger/cleverer

Why do you think this is happening.

*Because she is bigger than her.*

Connecting feelings with behaviour

This theme refers to attributions which were similar to characterological attributions in that they were internal states which affected behaviour.

However they were unstable internal states and could have changed in the future. Even so, often the way these states were referred to was as if they

were unchangeable - for example a like or dislike was rarely referred to as something that could be changed in the future. Sometimes the feelings or dislikes were clearly linked to character (as in the jealous quote below).

• Just wants to

*she just wants to make havoc on all of them.*

• Just does it for fun/ feels good

*Because she just likes doing it - its like boxing, she just likes doing it for fun*

• Jealous/ lonely

*Because he's not smart so he just gets jealous a lot and loses his temper.*

• overcompetetive

*like its a competition sometimes they have competitions and sometimes when they put them on the wall she (bully) wants hers to be the best and everyone telling her that hers is the best.*

• Feels better after bullying

*she just feels good when somebody feels bad.*

• Don't care

*No, because they are bullies and bullies don't care.*

• Wants attention

*she wants attention so she bullies children for attention.*

Choosing a victim

This theme gives an explanation of why the victim came to be chosen as the recipient of the behaviour. Three types of subthemes exist. The first identifies the victim as one of many possible victims with similar attributes. Because they are weaker or smaller or new they are picked on by a bully who attacks more vulnerable children.

The second kind of story involves a victim who is in some way connected with the aggressor. In these types of story, the aggressor is not likely to attack other children, but is involved in a conflict with one particular child. These two types of stories are described in more detail in the next section.

Occasionally the victim was chosen not because of attributes, but because of their particular behaviour at the time. Only on two occasions was this described as deliberately provocative, on the whole the behaviour was unintentional (such as missing a penalty).

In the theme of chance, the victim happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Out of all the attributions made, only two could be categorised as due to chance.

**One of a subset (a characterological attribution)**

**• weak/small/younger**

*because they thought whoever comes across, like little ones, they pick on them.*

**• new to school**

*because he is new in the school.*

• different (e.g. colour/gender)

*because, they don't like them*

*what is it about them they don't like?*

*maybe because they, uh, uh, are a different colour or something.*

• unprotected because of lack of friends/ siblings

*mostly little children because they are like defenceless especially if they don't have a big brother or sister.*

• object of jealousy due to positive attributes

*Because Lloyd is clever, and they're [bullies] not clever*

• not as good as the bully at sport/work

*If they did let him play, why would it happen to him again?*

*because he's [victim] not good as them people*

Particular target

• sibling hurt bully or bully's sibling

*Because their sisters are going to fight and Ahmed's sister went over to Cindy's sister and start fighting.*

Due to behaviour of the victim

• due to the victim's behaviour (not intentionally provocative).

*he thinks, if they fall down he thinks you fell and you're not going to get up because you're a cry baby you cant do nothing*



• due to the victim's behaviour (intentionally provocative).

*He gets a bit cheeky sometimes*

*Chance*

• happened to be in the way

*because her shoelace is untied she might have fallen*

*and if she hadn't fallen then it wouldn't have happened?*

*no*

### Solutions

All participants were able to give a solution for how the situation would end, although on a few occasions this was given as a hypothetical solution (*If only she [gang member] would stand up to this gang then maybe that would help.*)

Exactly half of the stories suggested that the victim would either tell a teacher, friend or parent what was happening and in the majority of these stories this then resulted in the situation being stopped. Teachers were almost seen as having magical powers to stop the situation, with some stories ending with the telling of the teacher as if that were the solution in itself. Parents were less likely to be told about the situation. When a friend became involved this usually resulted in the friend telling an adult about the situation. Only in one story did the friends protect the victim from the bully. In two stories the victim stood up to the bully: once without help and once as part of a group of other victims. Some of the participants acknowledged the difficulties of telling a teacher or a parent about what was happening in case it caused further bullying.

For each theme the number of stories giving that theme is in brackets. Some stories gave more than one solution so that the numbers equal more than 34.

• victim tells someone and the solution is resolved (11 stories)

*she tell her teacher and then they exclude them.*

• victim tells someone but the situation is not resolved (2 stories)

*and she gets beaten up and she goes away and tells the teacher and she says "play nicely" and this one says "we are miss" and then the teacher goes away .*

• teacher/ parent sees (3 stories)

How did this teacher find out?

*Because they were bullying and the teacher just see it.*

• Others see or tell teacher (12 stories)

*cause, there was another girl that saw the fighting that told the teacher*

• gang member changes and either whistle blows or convinces bully to change (4 stories)

*they could all just say hey have you ever thought about quitting this gang and not beating little children up*

• victim changes vulnerability (1 story)

Is there anything that the little boy could do to stop this happening again?  
*maybe he could go football training.*

• bully changes (2 stories)

is there anything that would be able to stop this?

*if they could be able to take losing*

if they became better losers?

*yeh*

how would that happen?

*probably if like - if they have like a role model who can take losing they might think to themselves why cant we.*

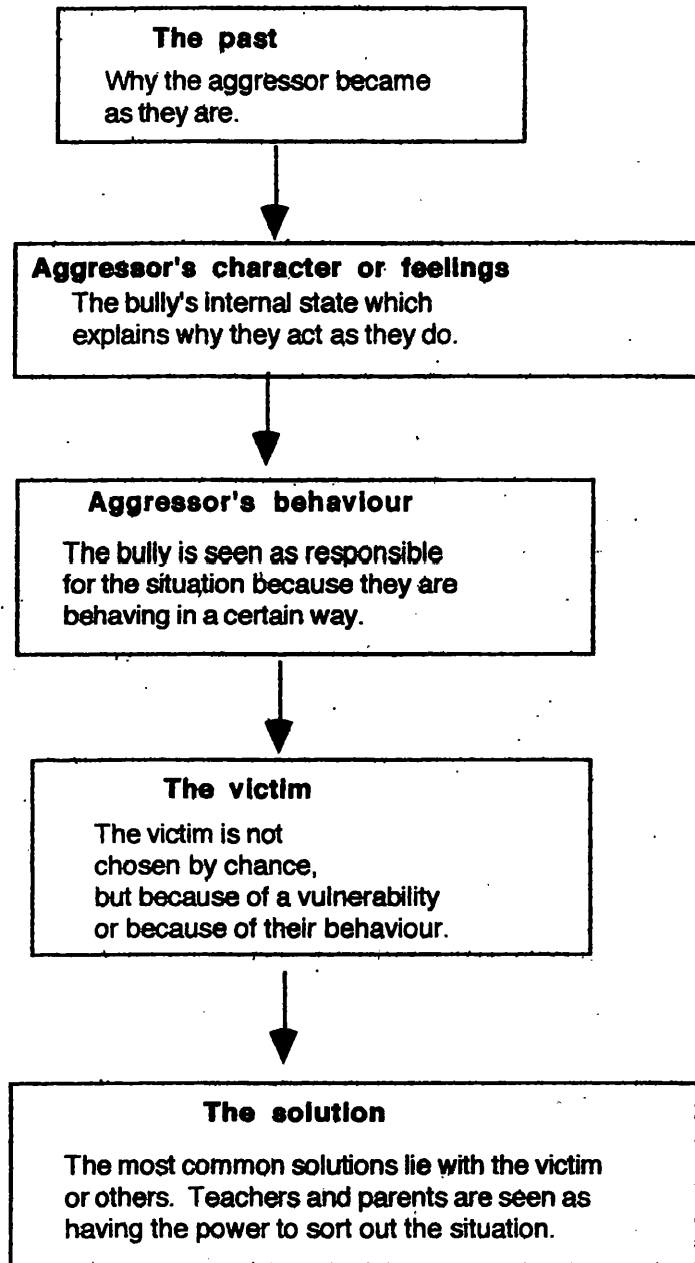
• victim stands up to the bully (2 stories)

*So the next day they started bullying her again and then she didn't mind them, she just walked off and they followed her and she said leave me alone and they started clapping and said well done you are now part of our gang.*

**3.5.1. A typical bullying story**

If one takes the different connecting themes above, one can build up a single story. This story seems to underlie most of the children's accounts and could be described as a 'typical bullying story'. The connections between the different parts are illustrated in Figure 7.

Figure 7: A framework for a bullying story



In order to illustrate this 'bullying' framework, one account which differs in 'plot' but which follows the theme is described in detail with illustrative quotes. A further similar analysis is given in Appendix 12.

A story is then described which does not have this theme (this can be seen as a negative case analysis).

## **The story of John, Mark and Lloyd**

**(all names are invented by the participant who told the story)**

### **Description**

John and Mark are two 11 year olds in the same class who are hitting and swearing at Lloyd who is 9. John is an Asian doll, Mark and Lloyd are black dolls. The two aggressors have bullied in the past, but this is the first time they have picked on Lloyd and he has never been picked on by anyone else. From the first, the scene is described as a case of bullying. As in all the stories, the word bullying is not mentioned by the researcher until the participant uses it:

Can you tell me what's happening in the scene?

*bullying*

So its a bullying scene is it, can you tell me what's happening?

### **The past**

Two details are given about the past. The first is that Lloyd had a brother who beat up the bullies and the second is that John and Mark had been influenced by other children to bully when they were younger.

Why did they choose Lloyd?

*because maybe the brother beat them up so they beat him up.*

Lloyd's brother beat them up?

*yeh,*

So how old is Lloyds brother

15

What is it about these two children, John and Mark that make them bully?

*Because there was a kid that used to be in their school and they were about 5 years old and the kid said come on, come on John and Mark, come lets be bullies, then they got used to bullying.*

### The aggressor

Attributions to John and Mark are mainly to do with feelings/ likes or dislikes.

*because they want to get into detention, they want to be rude boys, bad.*

*Its their fault, they like bullying*

### The victim

There are three types of reasons why Lloyd was chosen. The first type of reason given is because of the history (i.e. that his brother had bullied John and Mark). The type of reasons are more characterological. He is younger and he is clever which the bullies are not.

*Because Lloyd is clever, and they're not clever*

The third type of reasons given are to do with Lloyd's behaviour. Firstly he is described as sometimes being cheeky:

*He gets a bit cheeky sometimes*

Secondly he does not help the bullies with their work when they ask him to.

*and they ask him to help them and they bully him and he says no.*

### The behaviour

John and Mark are swearing and beating Lloyd. They are seen as being responsible for what is happening.

OK, whose fault is this that the bullying is happening?

*Its their fault, they like bullying*

### The solution

Three solutions are given for sorting out the situation. None of them involve the bullies taking responsibility for the solution. The first solution is a teacher seeing by chance, the second is for Lloyd to ask his older brother to apologise to John and Mark and the third is for Lloyd to tell the teacher by extricating himself from the situation without the bullies guessing his intent.

*Because they were bullying and the teacher just see it.*

how often will it happen again?

*up to his brother apologising*

and who will tell the dad

*the teacher*

and will tell the teacher

*Lloyd*

OK, what's going to help Lloyd tell the teacher?

*say, I'm going to toilet and he could pretend and go to the teacher.*

### **3.5.2. A negative case analysis**

Six of the stories told were one-off events and therefore would not usually be described as typical bullying situations. Two stories have a connection between victim and aggressor due to others or a past event. In the following story the two protagonists are fighting because of their younger sisters.

Cindy and Ahmed.

#### **Description**

The protagonists are a girl and a boy, Ahmed and Cindy. Ahmed started the fight in order to protect his younger sister who is fighting Cindy's sister. The situation has not happened before. Ahmed is 10 and Asian, Cindy is 9 and White.



### The past

The two protagonists have not fought before although Ahmed has fought other children because of his sister:

*because Ahmed's sister is really always fighting with people.*

### The aggressor

The only attribution made about the aggressor is to do with his sister and his feelings towards her.

Who is responsible for what is happening?

*Ahmed.*

Why is it that he does fight.

*Because he likes his sister.*

### The behaviour

The children seem to have equal power in the fight:

*They are fighting over their sisters, because they don't want their sister's to get hurt.*

So how are they fighting?

*Ahmed pushed Cindy and Cindy pushed him back.*

### The victim

The victim is seen as being a victim of the situation rather than any characteristics or behaviour of her own.

What's Ahmed thinking about?

*He is thinking, I'm not going to leave it, I am going to fight that girl because that girl's sister is fighting with my sister.*

### The solution

A difference in one solution given is that the situation just stops of its own accord.

and what is going to happen at the end?

*Maybe they're back friend. Playing with each other.*

However, there are still solutions given which follow the pattern of other stories:

What is going to stop this situation?

*Maybe they will tell the teacher.*

Who will tell the teacher.

Cindy - two of them are fighting - so someone else - their friend.

This story differs from the usual bullying framework in that it is a one-off event between two equals. This difference is illustrated in the lack of characterological or feelings attributions mentioned about either protagonist.

However, one of the solutions still lies with others, both with a friend having to tell as these two are fighting, and with a teacher to sort the out the situation, suggesting that even when the fighting is between equals, they are not always able to find their own solutions.

### **3.5.3 Other themes in the stories**

***Research Question: Are there other themes relevant to an understanding of children's attributions about the bullying situation?***

#### **Identification**

In Section 2.3 it was suggested that the form of testing used here could be considered a type of projective testing in which the participants might place some of their thoughts and feelings in one or other of the protagonists. Some of the stories suggest that the participants did use the stories to explore some difficult feelings. Although this can only be a tentative suggestion, the following section gives two examples one for the aggressor and one for the victim where identification or a projection of feelings may have been happening.

#### **Exploring aggressive feelings**

In one story in which there are many attributions towards the bully, the participant goes in detail into the aggressive behaviour of the bully.

*..and then we'll take these little ones. She just goes like this she gets their heads and bangs them together then she kicks them when they are lying down on the ground.*

*Now the last set of twins, she doesn't really do nothing to these twins, but she goes down on the ground and then she just spins around and she knocks them down like that.*

The exaggeration in this story was quite unusual and suggests that the participant may have been projecting some aggressive feelings into the aggressor.

### *Protecting the victim*

The only story in which the victim is protected by friends, goes into detail of how the victim was saved in the situation:

*her [victim] friends were trying to tell the teacher and she [victim] said "please no" and then her friends took her home - lots of children - their cousins her friends went home.*

*And her mum and her dad asked and said "what's wrong, why are the children coming" and she [victim] said "nothing"*

*And then on Monday she was going to school and they [bullies] start to tease her again and then her cousin came and then they [friends] said, if you are going to tease our friend we are going to tell the teacher or bash you up."*

This detailed explanation was unusual for solutions and suggests that the participant may have been describing a real situation or fantasising a situation she wished would happen.

### Elaboration of explanations.

In Section 1.4.3, it was suggested that one reason for the complexity of attributions is that people need to make sense of the world and for it to be orderly and meaningful (Bulman & Wortman, 1977). The complexity of the explanations given by the participants - particularly in their explanation of why the bullies came to be the way they are, gives some tentative evidence to suggest that the children in this study seek explanations for events that could be seen as random or meaningless. One example will be given below, but there are numerous possible examples in the data.

why does that make him bully?

*because someone must have bullied one of his relatives when they were younger and they died and had an injury from that and he feels bad and thinks its his fault and that he has some kind of bad feeling inside him*

why does he think its his fault?

*maybe because he was there and because the other bullies were going to bully both of them and he ran away and left the other one there to get hurt.*

## **4. DISCUSSION**

### **4.1. Overview**

The discussion will begin with a critique and evaluation of this study. Following the critique, the results will be discussed and their theoretical implications, with reference to the literature covered in the Introduction. Clinical implications and suggestions for future research will end this section.

### **4.2. Critique of the methodology**

The methodology used in this study was unusual in several ways and these shall be discussed below:

#### ***4.2.1. Applying quantitative methods to qualitative data***

The data were gathered using open-ended questions within an interview format more usually associated with qualitative methodologies. The transcripts produced as a result of the questionnaire would therefore be more suited to an analysis based on qualitative methodology (Smith, 1995). The use of content analysis is more usually associated with quantitative methodologies as it can be seen to 'reduce' the data to something that can be counted and therefore may seem at odds with the aim of this study which was to allow participants to be 'heard'.

However, it could be argued that the content analysis used in this study in some way 'bridged the gap' between qualitative and quantitative methodologies. By using content analysis, direct comparisons were able to be made with the categories found in previous research on attributions. In addition, it allowed the use of descriptive statistics which enabled a clearer picture to be seen of certain patterns in the data. Counts also allowed the distribution of attributions to be analysed between stories. At the same time further qualitative analysis meant that participants' stories were not reduced to the preconceptions of the researchers as in some of the previous research in this area.

However, the use of this bridging methodology means that the criticisms aimed at qualitative and quantitative methodologies are both relevant in criticising this study. For example, a quantitative researcher could criticise the validity, reliability and generalisability of this study on the grounds of the small number of participants and the way the data were coded. A qualitative researcher could argue that the methodology used did not sufficiently take the participants' perspective into account and therefore did not reveal the rich patterns of meanings in the interviews. In addressing these issues, attempts were made to test the reliability and validity of this study using methods associated with both qualitative and quantitative paradigms.

#### **4.3. Critique of the measure used**

The interview schedule was designed for the purpose of this study and was only piloted on one participant. Although some changes were made both at the piloting stage and after discussion with relevant professionals in the area, there were difficulties with the interview schedule which were only apparent after the first few interviews. Firstly, the interview spent too long on

asking the participants about details about the characters in their stories and, as timing was an issue, did not therefore leave enough time to completely explore the issues of fault and responsibility.

Secondly the use of certain words confused the participants. In particular the use of the word 'responsibility' which the participants appeared to interpret as meaning 'responsible' as in someone who could be trusted. This confusion in itself proved interesting as the participants frequently mentioned the teacher as being responsible for the problem. The use of the interview format, however, did mean that participants' meanings could be checked.

#### **4.4. Critique of the coding methodology**

Although coding is often described in the literature as a rigorous and 'objective' methodology, it is of course a largely subjective methodology. Three sources of bias existed in this particular study: the first was in the marking of text as attributions. Bias could exist in missing text that was an attribution and also in being over inclusive in marking something as an attribution that was not. The literature on attributions is not too helpful in suggesting when a statement is or is not an attribution and therefore it is possible that this study's data on attributions is biased on both counts. Two methods were used to attempt to make the process less biased: the first was to use the recommendations of other researchers in spotting attributions - in particular Peterson et al., (1993) and the second was for the researcher to go through the whole sample twice in order to minimise the effect of missing out attributions.

The second source of bias was in the construction of the coding frames. Although the first coding frame was well grounded in the literature and



largely followed previous, fairly robust, findings, the solutions coding frame was designed using theoretical concepts and therefore could be criticised in terms of construct validity. A particular problem was the use of two variables in assigning numbers to solutions. The use of equal weighting for both variables led to very different solutions being given the same numerical value. Several attempts at constructing a viable coding frame were attempted during the process of this study and the one used here seemed to allow most of the data to be described. However, it is possible that a different method would have been advisable - perhaps by the use of different coding for different variables. The low inter-rater reliability for this frame reflects some of the problems, and data using solutions were treated with caution.

The third source of bias is in using the coding frame to categorise the data. If the coding frame was unreliable, it is possible that the researcher was biased in how the data were categorised. An attempt was made to address this issue by having three different coders code the data using both coding frames.

Some further issues of reliability and validity are discussed below:

#### **4.5 Critique of the sampling methodology**

The purpose of the sampling was not to establish a random or representative sample of the population, but was to identify a specific group of participants who possessed the characteristics relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. At the same time, within that particular population it was

hoped that there would be a reasonably varied sample, from whom a good spectrum of attributions about aggressive incidents would be collected.

Although there was cultural diversity within the sample, there was a bias in the gender balance in each of the schools although the overall gender mix was good. It was possible, therefore, that different data would have been obtained if there had been an equal gender mix in each of the schools. This would have made sense theoretically because of different patterns of bullying found amongst girls and boys (Bjorkvist et al., 1992).

#### **4.6. Further ethical issues identified**

The ethical issues of this study were quite carefully thought out, however, at the end of the interviews two further ethical difficulties were identified.

Firstly, five children in school A were sufficiently concerned about bullying in their class to tell me about specific incidents. This suggested that they did not feel that they were sufficiently 'heard' within the school environment. However, in discussion with the class teacher, it seemed she was attempting to address some of the issues which were raised. Also it was encouraging that the school had chosen to be part of the anti-bullying project because of their concerns over bullying. However, the process of having heard the children's concerns and not being part of the system to allow change to happen was a frustrating and uncomfortable one.

Secondly, the letters sent out to the parents was a difficult issue. Ethically, parents needed to be fully informed of the purpose and nature of the study and therefore the letter was long. It was written in a reasonably straight forward way, but the headteacher at school A said that it was too

complicated for the parents in the catchment area and predicted there would be no replies. As it turned out, about a third of the parents did reply, but this difficulty reflected the problems of balancing the need for informed consent with the amount of information given. It is also possible that the length of the letters biased the sample to participants whose parents had fairly good English language skills.

## **4.7. Reliability and validity**

As addressed above, the qualitative and quantitative paradigms address different issue of reliability and validity and therefore in this section the two will be addressed separately.

### **4.7.1. *Quantitative Issues***

In discussing these issues, recommendations for reliability and validity issues in content analysis are taken from Krippendorff (1980) and Oppenheim (1992).

#### **Reliability**

Unfortunately due to the nature of the research it was not possible to carry out test-retest reliability by interviewing a sample of participants twice. Not only would this not have been practical within a school timetable, but also the data involved participants telling stories and these are likely to have differed on retest with different results.

Internal reliability of the interview schedule was also not possible, because of the categorical nature of the data.

The only reliability test that was therefore carried out was inter-rater reliability and the results in section 3.2 suggests that the coding frames were reasonably reliable in helping to code the data.

### Validity

Face validity was attempted by discussing the results of this study with two professionals with knowledge in this area, both from a clinical and educational perspective. The education professional was impressed by the data and said it fitted in with his current way of working which was to look at the feelings of powerlessness within the victim as without tackling these, the solutions suggested were rarely taken up by the victim. The clinician was interested in the link between the attributions and the solutions and thought that it might help explain some of the low rates of disclosure amongst a clinical population.

That this study has some content validity is suggested by a comparison of the data with previous research which suggests that the interview and methodology used did manage to sample the psychological domain of attributions.

In terms of validity, this study can be criticised on the grounds of its lack of concurrent validity: it would have benefited from other measures of attribution response (perhaps a questionnaire). It would have been interesting to find out, for example, if participants made a range of attributions under different conditions. However, this was not used as it was

anticipated that a short interview would increase the likelihood of schools and parents agreeing to pupils participating in this research study.

In terms of construct validity it would have been interesting to compare the findings of the interview schedule with some kind of mood or psychological well being questionnaire, but this was not used as it may have suggested to parents that I was worried about the mental health of their children.

#### **4.7.2. *Qualitative Issues***

As Creswell (1998) argues, the use of the term *verification* rather than *validity* allows a better understanding of the aims of qualitative research. The issues of trustworthiness and authenticity rather than generalisability are the most important with qualitative research.

Three procedures recommended by Creswell are followed here:

##### **Clarifying researcher bias**

By the use of a research diary, explaining the developing position of the researcher, including the effect of past experiences, the researcher's assumptions and biases could be judged by external auditors. The research diary is given in Appendix 14.

##### **Rich, thick description**

By the use of many quotes from the data and detailed descriptions, the reader is able to explore the theoretical conclusions with the data and allow themselves to be convinced or not by the arguments.

### Negative case analysis

In section 3.5.2. a negative case analysis is given to show how, by using negative cases, the working hypothesis was able to be refined in order to exclude stories that did not fit the usual definition of bullying. The use of negative cases, therefore, was used as additional evidence for the hypothesis that there was one underlying bully story.

A further source of verification, member check was also an aim of this study and to this end workshops and In service training sessions were offered to both schools. However, neither school took up the offer due to a busy schedule. Instead a summary of the findings was sent to schools and parents with opportunity for comment (appendix 15 and 16). The research findings are also due to be presented to the members of the anti-bullying project and other professionals.

## **4.8. Discussion of the results and theoretical implications.**

This section explores how the findings of this study fit in with the previous research and theoretical constructs. Three separate sections will discuss the implications for the literature on bullying, attribution and depression .

### **4.8.1. Bullying**

The results of this study have implications for an increasing understanding of children's knowledge and awareness of bullying and for the implications of certain types of attributions on behaviour related to solutions.

Firstly, the sophistication of children's stories, suggest that children of this age group, at least in this sample, had evolved explanations for themselves to explain why bullying occurred. This was not just true for articulate white children, but for children across a cultural range with varying degrees of competency in the English language.

The majority of the stories had elements reflecting those found in the literature on incidence and type of bullying (Whitney & Smith, 1994). For example, all three types of aggression reported in the literature were described by these children: direct physical, direct verbal and indirect aggression (e.g. being left out of games.) This suggests that the participants were reporting incidents from some kind of direct experience (although experience included watching fictionalised television programmes).

The participants in this study also demonstrated the over-inclusive use of the word bullying to describe all aggressive incidents identified by Smith & Levan (1995). Although the word bullying was never introduced by the researcher, the participants introduced the word into their stories at an early stage. The participants referred to many aggressive incidents as bullying even if they did not follow the definitions of professionals in the field.

In terms of solutions, two findings are relevant here. The first is that, as shown in the analysis of themes, there was a limited repertoire of solutions. The majority of situations were sorted out by a teacher, either through the victim telling, or someone witnessing the incident. The teacher in the majority of cases was seen as having almost magical powers to intervene. This contrasts with the findings in the ChildLine study (MacLeod & Morris,

1996) in which children who had identified themselves as victims expressed their frustration at the lack of change following disclosure to an adult.

The types of solutions described in the stories can also be seen to be passive in terms of the victim - particularly as half the stories involved solutions in which the victim was not involved at all in the solution. This contrasts with the models advocated in school interventions (e.g. Sharp & Smith, 1994) in which the victim and the bully with the help of an adult talk through possible solutions together and the pupils take the suggested action themselves.

The second finding of this study related to solutions, is the suggestion that the types of attributions made may relate to the type of solution suggested. The results of the correlation data suggest that participants who made more characterological attributions towards the victim were less likely to suggest solutions in which the victim had control or in which there was substantial change in the situation. This was particularly of interest as most attributions made to the victim were characterological.

A tentative suggestion, therefore, is that there may be individual differences in the way children react after bullying which is in part mediated by the types of attributions they make about the situation. This hypothesis can only be tentative because the participants were only describing hypothetical situations. In addition, the use of correlation data can only identify an association and not a cause of the behaviour. It is equally likely that there is a third variable which links the participants' responses to their solutions - for example some particular types of experiences such as being the youngest in a family.



#### **4.8.2. *Attributions***

##### **Perceived control**

The qualitative part of this study suggests that the notion of control might have been an important one for the participants. Firstly, the stories depicted some elements of what Lerner, (1980) calls 'belief in a just world.' All the stories told by the participants gave reasons for the bully acting in the way they did and reasons for the victim being chosen. The descriptions of the victims tended to suggest a certain amount of powerlessness. It is interesting to speculate whether the children identified with these victims or saw them as 'other'. - i.e. that there was a type of child who was a natural victim, but did not include themselves in this description.

The strength of adults in the stories also suggested a need for a just world. Teachers were often seen as the solution to the problem, suggesting the need for the participants in the study to feel surrounded by strong protecting adults.

The participants' stories also seem to reflect Bulman and Wortman's (1977) theory of attributions being used in order to make sense of the world. The theme of elaboration in the qualitative data suggests that the participants often thought of elaborate reasons why the situation had occurred. Also the theme of chance was only mentioned twice in all the attributions made by the participants.

### Self-blame attributions

In this study the idea of 'self' blame was not relevant as the participants were not describing their own situations. However, the attributions related to the fault of the problem were relevant to the theory described by Janoff-Bulman (1979). Firstly the participants made attributions that could be categorised as either characterological or behavioural. Secondly, this distinction did seem to have some construct validity because it distinguished between the types of solutions offered: The correlations suggested that characterological attributions but not behavioural attributions were related to the type of solution offered by the participants. In keeping with Janoff-Bulman's theory, the stories in the study with characterological attributions towards the victims (e.g. they are new) had solutions in which the victim had less control over change.

This study also elaborated Janoff-Bulman's theory by suggesting that there may be a third type of blame (called feelings in this study) that forms part of participants' attributions. This type of blame is an internal but unstable attribution and blames the incident on feelings, likes or dislikes (for example, jealousy). It is possible that this type of attribution has not been described in the literature before because it is unique to the bullying situation. However, one could easily imagine attributions being made of this variety in different situations (my husband hit me, because he was in a bad mood after work.) Further work would be need to be carried out with different populations to clarify this issue and it would also be interesting to see whether this attribution loaded with characterological (because of the internal aspect) or behavioural blame (because of the unstable aspect) in terms of mental health.

The third finding of this study relevant to the notion of self-blame is the finding that participants made a number of different types of attribution. This concurred with the Graham & Juvenon (1998) study, but went further in trying to explain how these attributions fitted together. A tentative framework was presented in the results section which suggested that the respondents made characterological attributions from which stemmed certain types of behaviour (i.e. the bully was seen as a bad person so he hit children). It also suggested that other people's behaviour could affect the bully's character, for example in suggesting that parental neglect could turn someone into a 'bad' person.

Characterological explanations for the bully also seemed related to characterological explanations for the victim by showing how the 'bad' bully chose a victim for characterological reasons such as size. This study suggested that, at least for the population interviewed, there was not a preference for one type of response (either characterological or behavioural) but a mixture of the two.

### Problems versus solutions

The suggestions of Brickman et al., (1982) for a distinction to be drawn between the blame for a problem and the solution, is supported by the data from this study. The responsibility for the problem and the solution often involved different protagonists suggesting that participants made a distinction between problems and solutions. Two models suggested by Brickman et al., are supported by the stories. In the *compensatory model* the blame of the problem is external to the victim, but the solution is the responsibility of the victim. For example, the blame may originally lie with the parents of the bully, but it is the victim who must tell a teacher what is

happening. Also relevant was the *medical model* where people are neither responsible for their problems or solutions (for example where the bully is seen as responsible for the incident, and a teacher is seen as responsible for the solution).

#### **4.8.3. *Clinical models of depression***

The findings of this study are relevant to both of the cognitive models discussed in the introduction. Firstly, in terms of the learned helplessness model of depression (Alloy et al., 1988), the attributions made by the participants were more likely to be characterological with regards to the victim (63%). This may be relevant as according to the Learned Helplessness theory, stable, global attributions (e.g. she is new, he is bad) are more likely to be linked with later depression. Although none of the participants in this study was identified as having particular mental health problems (although this was not explored), it is possible that those participants who made many characterological explanations might take on the 'hopeless' position described by Alloy et al., For example, those participants who described the victim as being smaller and weaker with no friends might, if they were ever a victim of bullying, find it hard to believe there was anything that could change the situation.

The limited repertoire of solutions shown in this story could also be problematic, particularly the reliance on others to solve the problem. It suggests that the story characters did not have enough power themselves to change the situation which would put them in the hopeless position associated with depression. However, in order to explore these suggestions further work is needed on the attributions of identified victims - particularly their relation with mental health/ mood measures.

could be researched further to explore if these attributions were a phenomenon of this study or a cluster of attributions found in other situations. The clinical implications of these types of attribution could then be explored - particularly their effect on mental health. Also their relationship with other type of attributions. It may be that the unstable nature of these attributions do not make them problematic, but the present study suggested that they were more similar to characterological attributions than behavioural attributions despite being changeable.

A further gap in the research is around the solutions suggested. Although, for example, Shapiro (1995) refers to solutions as attributions, solutions do not answer the question 'why' as other attributions do. More work therefore needs to be done to look at the theoretical framework for solutions and how they fit in with attribution theory as a whole.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

This study aimed to extend understanding of the types of attributions made about bullying and their possible effect on subsequent behaviour. The results of this project suggest that there may be links between the types of attributions made about victims and the types of solutions offered.

The themes explored in this project suggested that children of the age range tested could make surprisingly sophisticated explanations of why bullying happened - including exploring the past of the bully. However their solutions relied on the victim or other person 'rescuing' the situation and were not as sophisticated as the attributions.

These preliminary findings although in line with current theory and research, would benefit from different types of methodologies to explore them further - particularly in their application to a clinical population.

Implications for clinical and non clinical interventions are discussed in line with current practices in the area.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: letter to parents asking for consent for their child to participate in the study.

Research study name:

***Children's explanations of aggressive incidents in school.***

#### *Invitation for your child to participate in a research study.*

Dear Parent/Guardian

With your consent, I am going to be inviting your child to take part in a research study which we think may help us understand more about children. The information in this letter tells you about the project and asks your permission for your child to take part in the study. Please read and make sure you understand this letter *before* you sign the consent form.

If, for example, due to English being your second language, you have any difficulty in understanding this letter, and you do not have an *adult* friend or relative who can help you, please contact your child's teacher and I will try and arrange for a translation into your first language.

As you know, your child's school is currently looking at their anti-bullying policy and is working with teachers and children to help reduce aggressive incidents between children at school.

I am a trainee Clinical Psychologist and as part of the project I am interested in finding out what children think about why children hurt or upset others. I am studying this to see if children's likelihood of telling a parent or a teacher about aggressive incidents is related to what they think is the cause of the incident. For example, it may be that if children think it is their fault that they were hurt they may not tell anyone about the incident.

Your child's teacher has agreed to take part in the project and I am therefore writing to *all* the parents of children in the class to ask them if they would like their children to take part in the project. I will then ask the children with parental permission if they would like to take part. It is your and your child's choice if they want to take part in this study.

The project will involve *one* interview with your child which will take between 30/40 minutes individually at school. This interview will involve your child acting out some scenes using dolls in which one child is upset by one or more children. The questions will be *general* and will not ask your child to tell of any specific incidents they have been involved in or witnessed. The project does not in any way rely on your child telling me about real incidents of aggression in their school.

To help me keep track of what is said during the interview I would like to do an audio recording during the interview. In order to do this I need your consent and therefore I would be grateful if you could *also sign the enclosed consent form for tape-recording*. Once I have transcribed the contents of the tape they will be erased.

It is important for you to know that whatever your child tells me in the interview will be confidential to myself and my supervisor and neither your child or the school will be identifiable in any write up of the project. The school will not be informed of individual children's interviews. The only time that I will have to talk to the school is if I think that your child or another child is at significant risk from harm. If I think this I will tell your child's headteacher. For this study, however, your child does not have to tell me anything personal or private.

If you have any questions or you would like to talk to anyone about the project, please feel free to ring me at the number below or if you prefer you can write to me at the address at the top of the letter. If you have any concerns about your child you can also contact your child's class teacher. If for any reason your child becomes upset during the interview he/she will be given the name of someone he/she can talk to at school.

You do not have to allow your child to join this study and you are free to withdraw him/her from the study *at any time* and your child's education will in no way be affected by your decision.

I would be grateful if you could sign the enclosed form showing whether you would or would not like your child to be interviewed for the study. I would be grateful if I could have this by **5 February**.

I hope that your child will find taking part in this project interesting and that it helps your child's school in thinking about how children behave with each other.

Thank you for your time and help.

Trish Joscelyne  
Psychologist in Clinical Training

Enclosed: consent form for your child's participation  
Consent form for audio-recording  
Envelope for the above to be returned to your child's class teacher.

**Appendix 2: consent form for parents to return**

**WRITTEN CONSENT FORM**

Research study name:  
***Children's explanations of aggressive incidents in school.***

I have read and understood the letter about the research project taking part in my child's school and agree for my child to be interviewed for the project.

Parents name.....

Signature.....

Child's name.....

Child's teacher's name.....

If you have any questions please contact Trish Joscelyne at the above address.

Trish Joscelyne Clinical Psychologist in Training



### **Appendix 3: Consent form for audio-recording**

#### ***Children's explanations of aggressive incidents in school.***

I understand that as part of the research project the interview with my child will be tape-recorded using an audio tape-recorder.

I understand that the recording will not be heard by anyone else other than the person named below.

I understand that the tapes will be erased after they have been transcribed.

I understand that the tapes will be kept in a locked filing cabinet until they are erased.

I understand the written version of what my child says will not have his/her name with it.

With this understanding I agree for my child's interview to be tape-recorded for the purposes of this project only.

Name.....

Signature.....

Child's name.....

If you have any questions please contact Trish Joscelyne at the above address.

Trish Joscelyne Clinical Psychologist in Training

## Appendix 4: letter to students

Research study name:

***Children's explanations of aggressive incidents in school.***

Dear student

Your parent/guardian has given their permission for you to take part in this research study. Before you decide if you want to take part in this study it will help you if you read this letter.

As I explained to your class, I am a trainee psychologist doing a project in your school.

This research is looking at how children behave with each other in school and what they think are the reasons for children upsetting each other.

If you agree to take part in the study I will be talking to you at school for about half an hour. When I talk to you I will ask you with some dolls or play people to act out some scenes where children get upset because of what another child did. I will ask you some questions about your scenes.

I will *not* be asking you personal or private questions about things that have happened to you or your friends at school.

I will not be telling anyone else what we talk about except if you tell me something that means that you or someone else may be at risk of harm. If you do tell me about this, I will have to tell your headteacher about what you told me.

I will be tape-recording what you say to me to help me remember what we talk about, but these tapes will be wiped out when I have written down what you say and this will not have your name on it. The tapes are for the research project only and nobody else apart from me will listen to them.

If you get upset when we are talking, I will talk to you. You can also speak to Ms - who will talk to you some more. If you have any questions before or after I talk to you you can ring me at the telephone number at the top of this letter.

Remember, it is your choice if you agree to talk to me and you can decide at any time to stop talking to me.

I think that you will find our talk, interesting and fun and I hope you agree to take part. If you would like to take part please could you sign the enclosed piece of paper and give this back to me.

Please ring me if you want more information or you can ask your class teacher to get me to contact you if you prefer.

Thank you for your help.

Trish Joscelyne

## **Appendix 5: Consent form for participants**

### ***Children's explanations of aggressive incidents in school.***

**I have read the letter explaining about the above project and yes, I would like to be interviewed for the study about what I think of why children upset each other at school.**

**Signature.....**

**Name.....**

**Please ask your class teacher to contact me if you have any questions or worries about this project.**

## **Appendix 6: Consent form for headteachers**

### ***Children's explanations of aggressive incidents in school.***

This is to confirm that I..... Headteacher of

.....school gives permission for Trish Joscelyne

(Psychologist in Clinical Training) to interview pupils as part of the above research project.

I understand that only pupils who have parental permission will be interviewed and that the interview will last for between 30/40 minutes.

I understand that pupils will not, as part of the project, have to disclose any personal information, but if they do disclose information which suggests that they or another child may be at risk from harm, I or a named member of staff will be informed.

I also understand that Trish Joscelyne will be giving feedback about the results of the project to the parents, pupils and staff. The exact nature of the feedback will be discussed at a later date.

Signed .....

## **Appendix 7: The interview schedule**

*I would like you to choose any of these play people to act me out a scene where one child gets upset because of what one or more children do to him or her.*

***Can you tell me about the people in the scene***

- How old are they
- What names have you chosen for them
- How well do they know each other

***Can you tell me what is happening in the scene?***

- Has this kind of thing happened before?
- How often?
- Will this happen again?

***Why is this happening?***

- Any other reasons.
- Would B behave like this to anyone else in the class
- Is there anyone else in the class he/she wouldn't do this to?
- Who is responsible for this happening?
- Is what is happening anybody's fault
- What about this scene is V/Bs fault.
- What is it about B that makes him/her do this? (bully characteristics)
- Why did B choose V to do this to (victim characteristics)
- Does B do this to anyone else?
- Does anyone else do this sort of thing to B?
- Does anyone else do this sort of thing to V?
- What is B thinking about while this is happening?
- What is V thinking about while this is happening?

***Is there anything that will stop this happening again?***

- Who is responsible for stopping this happening again?
- Will B/V do [suggested things.]
- What will stop them
- What will help them
- Will B/V tell anyone about what is happening?
- What will help them
- What will stop them

***Can you give me another scene where a child is upset by what a child/children is doing, but where something different is happening.***

## Appendix 8: The coding frame for attributions

An attribution answers the question: why is this happening, ask yourself this as you code the data.

Is it happening because of something about the bully?  
Code as **B**

Is it happening because of something about the victim?  
Code as **V**

Does it describe something that seems internal to that person and unchangeable (e.g. they are small). Code as **CHAR**.

Does it describe something that is internal but one could imagine changing such as an emotion or like/dislike? Code as **FEEL**.

Is the statement something about someone's behaviour - i.e. something that they could choose to do or not do. Code as **BEH**.

For Behavioural codes only.

Is the statement describing the bully or victim's own behaviour? Code as **OWN**.

Is the statement describing someone else's behaviour other than the victim or bully - e.g. parents having had an effect on the situation. Code as **OTH**.

Is the statement describing something that is happening now. Code as **PRES**.

Or is the statement something that has had an effect on the situation, but happened in the past. Code as **PAST**.

Does the statement not ascribe blame to anyone, but just say it was something that happened by chance (e.g. victim fell over). Code as **CHANCE**.

At the end you should have the following list of codes to choose from:

<b>B/CHAR</b>	<b>B/FEEL</b>	<b>B/BEH/OWN/PRES</b>	<b>B/BEH/OWN/PAST</b>
		<b>B/BEH/OTH/PRES</b>	<b>B/BEH/OTH/PAST</b>
<b>V/CHAR</b>	<b>V/FEEL</b>	<b>V//BEH/OWN/PRES</b>	<b>V/BEH/OWN/PAST</b>
		<b>V/BEH/OTH/PRES</b>	<b>V/BEH/OTH/PAST</b>
<b>CHANCE</b>			

## Appendix 9: Coding frame for solutions

What happens	Who	Solution	Score
Victim tells	teacher	situation resolved (unspecified)	4
	headteacher	bully removed from school	4
	friends	victim removed from school	3
	siblings	bully punished (other)	4
	police	bully helped to change behaviour	5
	parents	victim helped to change behaviour	3
	teacher	no change	1
		situation resolved (unspecified)	3
ally of victim in situation tells	teacher	situation resolved (unspecified)	3
	headteacher	bully removed from school	2
	friends	victim removed from school	3
	siblings	bully punished (other)	4
	police	bully helped to change behaviour	2
	parents	victim helped to change behaviour	1
	teacher	no change	3
ally of bully in situation tells	teacher	situation resolved (unspecified)	2
	headteacher	bully removed from school	3
	friends	victim removed from school	4
	siblings	bully punished (other)	2
	police	bully helped to change behaviour	1
	parents	victim helped to change behaviour	1
	teacher	no change	2
Someone sees (by chance)	friends	situation resolved (unspecified)	2
	siblings	bully removed from school	1
		victim removed from school	2
		bully punished (other)	3
		bully helped to change behaviour	1
		victim helped to change behaviour	1
		no change	1
Victim stands up to aggressor		bully changes	5
		no change	1
Victim finds other solution (e.g. gets older brother to apologise)		situation resolved (unspecified)	4
		bully removed from school	4
		victim removed from school	3
		bully punished (other)	4
		bully helped to change behaviour	5
		victim helped to change behaviour (but not bully)	3
		no change	1
		convinces bully to change	4
		tells someone (as above)	
		no change in situation	1

bully changes			4
---------------	--	--	---



## **Appendix 10: Examples of different types of bullying behaviour.**

*Most of the stories fell into only one category - where they fell into more than one category they were codesdinto the most aggressive category i.e. , in the following order of preference: Excluding from games, name-calling, destroying property, physical aggression.*

### **Excluding from games/ spreading rumours**

*This scene is happening because these who are playing they don't want her to play and they might think that because she's a different religion or something*

*They was friends and somebody came from Jessica's class to tell Adam if Jessica keep swearing at him.*

*Was that a friend of Jessica's*

*Not a friend*

*Was that a girl or a boy that did that*

*A girl*

*And why did she do that?*

*Because she want Adam not to be Jessica's friend.*

### **Name calling:**

*come along and they just start being mean to them and cuss- calling them names and they're all bigger than them*

*The boy is swearing at the girl and the girl didn't do anything.*

*Well when you walk around some people keep saying you are a baby because someone is looking after you.*

### **Pushing/shoving**

*Since she's Chinese right, that's why I picked her, cause Chinese usually use Martial Arts as self-defence, but this one doesn't use it as self defence she just uses it to beat these little children up she doesn't threaten them -*

*She's walking along and the little girl is playing and then she pushed the little girl down and said ' Oh sorry I didn't mean it" and the little girl is frightened.*

### **Other (e.g. destroying property)**

*and she's doing her work and just because her one is better than hers she goes and screws it up and she gets upset*

**Appendix 11 Result of non-significant correlations between the two stories from each participant.**

Total number of behavioural attributions - comparison of stories A and B.	$r = -.241$ $df = 15$	$p = .35$	n.s.
Total number of characterological attributions - comparison of stories A and B	$r = .212$ $df = 15$	$p = .41$	n.s.
Total number of attributions to the bully - comparisons of stories A and B	$r = -.097$ $df = 15$	$p = .71$	n.s.
Total number of victim attributions - comparisons of stories A and B	$r = .072$ $df = 15$	$p = .78$	n.s.
Score on solutions - comparison of stories A and B.	$\rho = .206$ $n = 17$	$p = .43$	n.s.

## Appendix 12: Second example of a 'bullying story'.

### **Tom's Story**

#### Description

Four children are involved three aggressors and one victim. The aggressors are 11, 12 and 13 and the victim is younger at 10. The aggressors are two boys and a girl and the victim a boy, Tom. The aggressors are either white or Asian and the victim is black. As with many of the stories the word 'bullying' is introduced early in the story: *these three people are ganging up on this person and bullying them*

#### The past

The aggressors were seen to have been influenced by other children in the past.

have they always been bad?

*not always, but when they start hanging around with other people, like bigger kids.*

#### The aggressors character or feelings

In this story the aggressors are seen as being bad and are also picking on Tom because he is black and they are racist.

why is this happening?

*because people are racist*

However, again likes and dislikes are brought in to help explain the situation.

and the other people they pick on, why do they pick on them?

*because, they don't like them*

#### The behaviour

The only attribution made about the bullies' behaviour is that they smoke a lot:

*because, they're bad and because they smoke a lot*

#### The victim

Attributions to Tom are mostly characterological, however he also behaved in a way that was provocative to the bullies in that he told on them for smoking.

*they don't know him that well because he's a new boy they are picking on him.*

so what's special about Tom is that he is new?

*and he's a different colour*

*like besides if they like having a smoke and they are not allowed he will tell and he won't like it.*

*so has that happened that he has told, or do they just think that it will happen.*

*he's told on them already*

#### The solution

This participant found it very difficult to suggest a solution. Tom was seen as too frightened to tell anyone what was happening. In the end the solution is hypothetical and in response to some over directive questioning on the researcher's part!

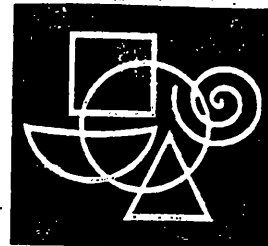
*he wants to tell the teacher but because they threaten him he won't tell*

what's going to stop this happening again?  
*either they get suspended or miss their play times or learn a lesson*  
who is going to punish them?  
*the teacher*  
and how is the teacher going to find out  
*if Tom tells*  
but you said that Tom is too frightened to tell  
*but you asked me because how would they.*  
so do you think this will stop happening?  
*maybe*  
So Tom might tell the teacher.  
*if he's brave enough*

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**SALOMONS  
CENTRE**

Dr P Joscelyne  
27 Rosehill Terrace  
Brighton  
East Sussex BN1 4JJ

19<sup>th</sup> November 1998

Dear Trish,

**Re: Children's explanations of aggressive incidents at school within an attributional framework and the association with decisions about disclosure: a qualitative study**

Thank you for your letter dated 12<sup>th</sup> November 1998 with enclosure. The Panel note that you have given very good and careful consideration of all the points raised in our letter dated 5<sup>th</sup> November 1998 and is pleased to provide Full Ethical Approval for your research project.

We look forward to seeing the results and hope you enjoy the research.

Yours sincerely,

**Professor Tony Lavender**  
**Chair of Ethics Panel**

c.c. **Caroline Hogg**  
**Nigel Armstrong**

## Appendix 14: Research diary

Through keeping notes of my thoughts during the process of researching and writing this dissertation, this research diary shows the development of my ideas. This helps the reader identify any possible biases.

April 1998

Receive a copy of \_ letter re: the anti-bullying project - this seems a golden sent opportunity to access schools. I *am* interested in bullying wonder if I can think of something that hasn't already been done?

13/7

\_ and \_ reject my first idea for a project based on looking at the development of children's definitions and understanding of bullying. They said it was interesting but not sufficiently clinical to justify their involvement. Not a comment made by the external examiner when I put the proposal in for approval. However, I think the \_ project is my best chance of getting into schools so will go back to the drawing board.

July 13th - August 6th

Have a long discussion with P. (behaviour support teacher). We were discussing disclosure of bullying situations and how it was worrying that it was so low. He said that some of the kids that he works with have never told anyone about what is going on. We talked about some of the reasons for this low amount of disclosure. Partly it is that the children get threatened if they tell, but I begin to wonder what internal as well as external factors would affect why children choose to disclose. We also talked about how children react differently to being bullied and how they work out solutions in different ways. I was thinking about a boy in a class I was teaching in who was being bullied despite all the efforts myself and the school made to stop it happening. In the end, he found two friends who protected him out in the playground and the bullying stopped. Even when he was being bullied however, he was so angry at the bully that he didn't seem to become depressed - wonder if types of cognitions are relevant to the effect of bullying - it would fit in with the depression literature.

I think looking at attributions is the way forward and it doesn't seem to have been done with bullying. However, if I am going to interview a non-clinical population, then I need to find a methodology that looks at children's attributions without directly asking them about their experiences. Otherwise I would need to find children who had already disclosed which would mean I wouldn't get disclosers and non-disclosers who I wanted to compare. Also the whole process of talking to children about bullying is likely to be an ethical nightmare because of there not being any clinical support in schools.

Had the idea that I might use hypothetical stories so that kids use their experiences rather than talking about their experiences. A form of projective testing in some ways. Wonder what is the best way of doing this.

6/8

Think I have a viable project. Attributions seemed to make the connection for me with the differential effects of being bullied: perhaps for example, children who blame themselves are less likely to find an outside solution to their problems and become more depressed. Present this to \_ and \_ who seem very enthusiastic - \_ already has an interest in attributions and said she would share her ideas with me.

28/10

Found this quote which somehow seems relevant:  
Meaning rules human action, whereas cause determines physical processes. The rules of meaning rather than the laws of nature explain human behaviour. E. Hutten.

Research week.

I presented my research - the design seemed to leave people flummoxed. They seemed to want me to 'prove' that victims and non victims made different attributions about the bullying process. I didn't do a very good job of explaining that we don't even know if children make attributions at all about bullying.

What struck me most of all during other people's presentations is that they all seemed to be about making meaning of a traumatic event whether that event be sexual abuse or finding out HIV status or head injury or, in my case, bullying.

B is also doing something about attributions and seems to have the complete opposite hypothesis to me. I suggested that internal attributions might suggest poor outcome (with too much self-blame being bad) and she suggested that internal attributions give people more power over their own fate - need to sort this one out.

Very useful meeting with Len Rowland who helped me understand the way an interview schedule should work. I need to be very clear about what psychological constructs I am trying to tap into and then ask general questions followed by specific questions if I need to. Obviously, cognitions rather than emotions are my main target at this point. He thought I could justify my design on the grounds that the children will have knowledge of bullying and that we need to see what the 'normal' population's attributions are before we start sampling a clinical population. Felt reassured!

November

Read Janoff-Bulman paper which now seems to make sense of the paradox between mine and B's ideas. Self-blame can be problematic if it is characterological (i.e. if someone blames something about themselves which they have no power to change), but can be useful if it is behavioural (i.e. they can do something practical to change the chance of things happening again). This makes sense of why Bettina's group might benefit from some internal attributions about their premature babies, because there will be some behaviours that they can change in the future. Will need to look at this as a construct in the interview.

Have also read Brickman's paper about the difference between blame for the cause of something and the responsibility for the solutions which seems to fit in with the Janoff-Bulman stuff. One can not take blame for the cause of something (e.g. cancer), but can take responsibility for the some of the solution?

All this seems to be a lot about power and how much power people have over change which fits in with the learned helplessness theory. If the bullied children feel that they are powerless (and being bullied by definition almost involves a loss of power,) then they may not believe they have any power over solutions so might not tell anyone.

2/12

First day in class. Feel very depressed by the experience. Cannot see that education is doing anything for these children. Feel equally torn between relief that I got out of teaching and guilt that I am not in there doing my best. No wonder aggression is a problem. The children were not even able to share a book, they had no skills for dealing with turn-taking or negotiation and these children are 10. I have seen 4 year olds who understood about sharing.

Some of the children told me about some things that had been happening to them in class and there seems to be a general pattern, as the teacher said, of an overall interaction of aggression between these children. Reported it back to the teacher, who said that she knew about all the incidents I reported and that they were being dealt with. The whole problem seems a systemic one though. There is a whole lack of atmosphere of co-operation and respect amongst the kids. Just walking down the stairs at break time one takes one's life in one's hands. Am very glad this school decided to take part in the anti-bullying project.

24/2/99 doing the interviews

Some concepts do seem to make sense when I interview these children. E.g. the idea of internal and external attributions and differentiating solutions and problems. The characterological stuff seems to be the most interesting. There seems to be a difference in the types of attributions made towards the victims and the bullies.

The bully is either a bad person, or something has happened to them or they are doing it for a reason. The victim is so often a victim because of a physical characteristic or as a victim of a situation. Does this relate back to my feelings of powerlessness?

The problem seems to lie with the bully, but the solution with the victim or teacher. A real lack of personal control? So rare for the victim to stand up for themselves or for the bully to be responsible for the solution.

The descriptions of the bully characteristics are very sparse whereas the victims are quite detailed.

March

Have been thinking about the best way to analyse the interviews. Have read the Content Analysis of Verbatim Explanations and wonder if I could use that as a tool at least as part of the analysis. The only problem is that it does not cover the characterological/behavioural difference that I think is important nor the solutions vs. attributions. Also there is a sliding scale for internal/external and there doesn't seem to say where this scale came from. The literature talks about an attribution either being one thing or another, not more or less of something. Perhaps I should consider designing my own coding frame based on the literature.

Transcribing interviews. Listening again, I am astonished at how detailed these stories are. Especially the ones that go into the past for explanations. Yet the solutions are pretty much the same even if the stories are different. It is almost like these children are coming out with the school motto - if you are being bullied tell a teacher. Reading the ChildLine stuff and from my own experience, I wonder if telling a teacher always does come up with the goods.

April/May

Writing the literature review most of the relevant literature on attributions seems to come from outside bullying. One problem is that there is a suggestion that people have response styles i.e. they lean towards either one type of attribution or another. The children in my survey seem to make a range of different attributions. Wonder if this is because I have got a non-clinical population. I am going to need to do some kind of theme analysis as well as the content analysis to try and connect the different attribution data. Sue was talking about IPA perhaps this is a methodology I can use. Grounded theory from what I have read doesn't seem as relevant partly because I am only analysing selected pieces of text and partly because I am not attempting to build up a new theory, but more understand the links between different parts of text.

In a qualitative seminar group, gave B a piece of my text to analyse just asking him to find attributions. He said that reading it he found a sense of powerlessness in what the children were saying and said it made sense that in that particular story, the teacher just happened to come along.

June

Have analysed the text and presented my findings to P (behaviour support teacher). He really thought they made sense and said that the more he works with children who have been bullied, the more he has stopped thinking about solutions and concentrates instead on the victims feelings of loss and powerlessness. He thinks that the children he works with are not in a sufficient position of strength to bring about change unless they feel enough power to do so. I told him about E's study and how she felt that group work for victims would be a way forward and he said he agreed totally because in group work some of the links between people can begin to strengthen their sense of self.



## **Appendix 15: report sent to parents**

Dear parent/guardian

You may remember that your child took part in a study last term looking at what children thought were the reasons behind why bullying happened.

For your interest, I am writing to you with a summary of the results which you may want to share with your child if he/she is interested.

For this study I interviewed 17 children in two schools. During the interview they were asked to tell me two imaginary stories about a situation in which someone was upset. I used small play figures to help them when they were telling the stories.

I tape-recorded these stories and then transcribed them so that I had a written version of what the children said in the interview.

Using these stories I looked at all the times that a child had said something which explained why the situation happened. For example the children said things like:

'Because the bully is a bad person'

'The person being bullied has been chosen because he is a new, small person'.

I also noted down all the solutions that the children gave for ways that the problem could be stopped.

Using a mixture of statistical analysis and by looking at the themes that came out of all the stories, I came to the following conclusions.

- Children of this age group, from a range of different cultures had a good deal of knowledge about bullying and had some very sophisticated explanations of why the bullying in their stories had happened.
- Children's explanations of why the bullies bullied were mostly in terms of their feelings or likes and dislikes (for example that they were jealous of the person they were bullying).
- Children's explanations of why children were chosen as victims was mostly in terms of their size, newness to the school or weakness.
- There seemed to be a connection between children's explanations of why the bullying happened and what kinds of solutions they offered: Children who suggested that the victim was being bullied because of something about them (like their weakness) had solutions in which the victim did not have much control. For example a low control solution would be for a teacher to just happen to see the situation.
- The bullies or aggressive children were seen as responsible for the situation, (because of their behaviour) but were not seen as responsible for the solution.

These results of the project have also been sent to your child's school with some recommendations of how the anti-bullying project can take into account some of the gaps in children's thoughts and knowledge about bullying.

I would like to thank you for letting your child take part in this project. All the children I interviewed seemed to enjoy the time and I was impressed by how much they had thought about bullying.

Please feel free to contact me at the above address, or through your child's class teacher, if you have anything you would like to say about the project.

Yours sincerely

Trish Joscelyne  
Psychologist in Clinical Training

## **Appendix 16: report sent to schools**

**An explanation of aggressive incidents at school.**

**Report of the result of the project.**

**Trish Joscelyne**

**Psychologist in Clinical Training at Salomons, Tunbridge Wells.**

This study explored what children's explanations were for why aggressive incidents happened at school. For the study I interviewed a total of 17 children in Years 5 and 6 from two schools. The interview asked children to tell two different imaginary stories about an incident at school when someone was upset because of what other children were doing. The children were asked questions about why they thought the incident was happening. The stories were taped and then transcribed.

Following the transcription, two types of children's statements were noted: the first was any explanation that the children made about why the incident had happened. For example, children might say 'because the bully is a naughty boy' or 'because the little child was new to the school and didn't have any friends'. The second type of statements noted was anything that seemed to offer a solution to how the problem would be resolved. For example the children said 'a friend would tell a teacher'.

All the explanations were then coded with the following codes:

*Characterological* (this was something about the victim or bully that seemed unchangeable - for example 'he is smaller than the bully'.)

*Behavioural* (this was an explanation which suggested it was the bully or victim's fault because of what they were doing - e.g. 'because he shouldn't have hit the little boy')

*Behavioural/past* Sometimes the children explained the bullies behaviour by suggesting things in the past that made them how they were, or explained the current behaviour. (for example, his parents ignored him when he was little, or this little boy's big brother bullied him when the bully was young.)

*Feelings* These explanations suggested that the behaviour was happening because of the feelings, likes or dislikes of the bully or victim. (For example, 'this boy is jealous because nobody will play with him.')

The solutions were given 'marks' depending on how much control the victim had with the solution (high marks = high control) and how much power the victim had with the intervention (high marks = high power).

As well as the coding, I also explored some of the themes which arose as part of the stories.

### **Results**

The children in this study from all cultures with different competencies in English, had surprisingly sophisticated explanations of why bullying happened - especially in thinking about the influence of the past on the children's current behaviour. This sophistication suggests that firstly they have a reasonable amount of knowledge about the area, and secondly that it was important for them to try and make sense of why children bully and are bullied.

In terms of explanations, the most common kinds of explanation about the bully were that they were doing it as a result of their likes/dislikes and feelings. For the victim, it was most common that a characterological statement was used as an explanation - for example, that they were new to the school.

An important part of this project, was to explore the relationship between the types of explanations made by the children and what solutions they offered. Correlational analysis suggested that children who made a number of characterological explanations centred around the victim were more likely to suggest solutions in which the victim had low control over the solution and less power in any intervention. For example, a story character who was described as being a victim because of their size, colour and newness to the school would be associated with a solution that involved a teacher seeing the incident and the bully being expelled without the victim being involved at all.

The theme analysis part of the project suggested the following themes.

- **Connecting the past with the present**

Explanations are given about why the bully is behaving in a certain way based on the past, such as parents who ignore them or because the bully had been bullied in the past.

- **Connecting character with behaviour**

Bullies were seen as responsible for the problem because of their behaviour, but were seen as being influenced by their inherent 'badness' or because of their feelings, likes or dislikes.

- **Choosing a victim**

The choice of victim was not random with victims either being chosen for something about them (such as size) or because they were connected in some way with the bully (the victim's brother had hurt the bully in the past) or because of their behaviour (usually something 'innocent' such as 'acting like a baby' by holding hands when being shown round the school.)

- **Solutions**

Half the solutions involved the victim telling a teacher, parent or friend about the problem, whereas half involved someone seeing the event by chance. The bully was usually punished as a result of their behaviour.

## **Conclusions and suggestions**

As can be seen, the children have some sophisticated ideas about why bullying happens, but perhaps less of a sophisticated repertoire of solutions. Telling a teacher often seemed to be an end in itself, with an almost magical result after telling the teacher.

As many teachers know, it is often very hard to stop certain types of bullying behaviour and the victim cannot always be protected. If these children were ever to become a victim of serious bullying behaviour, they may be at risk of emotional difficulties if their solutions were repeatedly not successful.

Also the number of explanations - both about the bully and the victim - which seemed to suggest that the situation was out of their direct control (the bully was at the mercy of their feelings and the victim at the mercy of their smallness or newness) is a concern. Literature from mental health suggests that these attributions are more likely to be connected to poor mental health.

In terms of education, the more schools are able to offer in terms of intervention strategies for the children, the more they are likely to begin to have some choices about what they do in difficult situations. For example, some schools have set up peer counselling, assertiveness training for victims, training for lunchtime supervisors, and improved playground facilities. Sharing the reasoning behind these interventions with pupils and allowing them a say in development plans, helps them see that bullying is not something that is out of their control.

In terms of direct intervention with the bullies and bullied, methods such as 'The No Blame Approach' emphasise the need to include both the victim and the bully in planning an effective intervention. Given the results of the study, it would seem important that children, both victims and bullies are helped to understand that bullying as a behaviour is a 'choice' that is made and is therefore something that can change in the future.

These and other methods are described in Peter Smith and Sonia Sharp's 'School Bullying - Insights and Perspectives.' As you know, the Hackney Anti-Bullying project has also got a range of suggestions and types of help to offer. Hopefully the result of the project will help you in planning an effective anti-bullying policy and strategy.